

Beauty and the
Beastly
Highlander

KENNA KENDRICK

Beauty and the Beastly Highlander

He made her dreams come true. She lifted his curse...

Kenna Kendrick

Contents

[Thank you](#)

[About the book](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Epilogue

But there's more...

Afterword

Do you want more Romance?

Lifting a Highland Lass's Curse

Never miss a thing

Thank you

About the Author

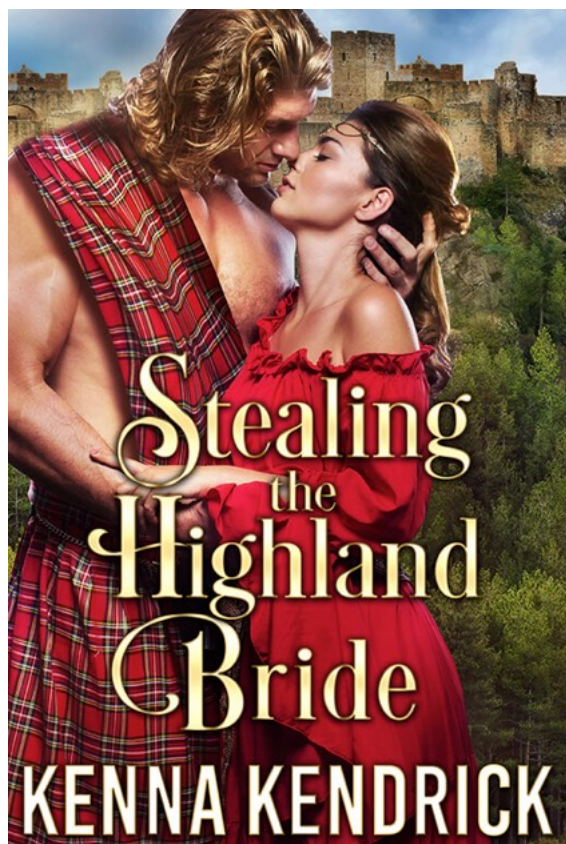
Thank you

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About the book



A recluse Laird, a lass with a dream, and a tale as old as time...

Etna is an unusual woman. First, there's her tendency to speak her mind without thinking of the consequences. And, of course, there's the fact she's completely **obsessed with gaining knowledge**.

The only thing more important to her than reading is working as a tutor. But she doesn't expect that **her love of books will lead her to the cursed castle** of a Laird, who is rumored to be a real beast.

Finley MacAlistair agreed to hire a tutor for his daughter, despite his **rule to keep outsiders away**. Believing there is a traitor near him who causes problems in his clan, he trusts no one.

When he meets the intriguing Etna, Finley thinks he made the **wrong decision**. The lass is outspoken, challenges his authority, and her presence is driving him **mad with desire**.

That's a distraction he can't afford!

But, Etna's patience and tenderness slowly turn the recluse Highlander into the loving man he used to be.

However, she must never discover the sins of Finley's past. For he committed an unforgivable crime, and the greatest victim is his own child...

He made her dreams come true. She lifted his curse...



* * *

Chapter One

Etna sat by the window of her father's study, the hefty book in her lap long forgotten. She was staring at her father, who was looking at her with such a pleased smile that it only served to infuriate her even more.

"What makes ye think that I wish to tutor Laird MacAlistair's daughter?" she asked him as she stood and crossed her arms over her chest defensively. Her father hadn't even asked her. He had simply announced that he had accepted the offer on her behalf.

"All yer life ye wished to be a tutor," her father, Dougal, reminded her. "Ye were but ten years of age, and ye always said '*Dadaidh*, I wish to be a tutor like ye when I grow up.' Weel, ye're all grown up noo, and Laird MacAlistair asked specifically for ye."

That was another thing that Etna didn't understand. "Why would the Laird ask for *me*?"

"Because he kens ye're me daughter," her father said. "And he kens that ye'll teach his daughter weel, like I taught him weel when he was but a bairn. He wants someone he can trust, and he trusts us. Ye should be honored that he asked for ye."

Honored. What is honor compared to fear?

Etna had heard everything there was to hear about Laird MacAlistair. It was hard to live under his rule and not know that he was an unpleasant man at best, a cruel man at worst. There were rumors about him that Etna couldn't simply ignore, tales of his brutality that made her skin crawl. Everyone called him *Beast* because of his viciousness and his allegedly disfigured face that made mirrors break and children run to their mothers.

That's what happens to evil men, Etna had heard one of the old women in the village say. *Their evil shows on their face*.

Of course, Etna didn't believe in that. She knew enough about the world, had read enough books, and studied enough subjects to know that it was nothing but old wives' tales. That was one of the reasons why she hated being in that village so much. Everyone was close-minded and wouldn't even consider the possibility that the Laird had simply had an accident or had been wounded in some other way. They had a superstition for everything, and when Etna tried to tell them that they were wrong, she feared that they would hang her as a witch.

"Ye've wanted to leave this village ever since we came here," her father reminded her. "Noo is yer chance."

"Faither, I wished to go back to Edinburgh," Etna reminded him. "Na the Laird's castle. I want to go back home. I want to go back to the city."

"Ye ken that we canna do that."

Etna fell back down onto the chair with a sigh. Every time the two of them had that conversation, her father always told her the same thing: they couldn't return to Edinburgh. Etna had tried to reason with him, telling him that she could work now, too, and that they would have two incomes to support themselves, but Dougal wouldn't hear any of it. She was certain that it was more than their lack of money. She was certain that he had grown to like the quiet life of the village, but she couldn't enjoy a single minute of it. Ever since they had left Edinburgh after her mother's death, looking for a cheaper place to live, Etna had been dreaming about the moment that she would go back.

"Ye ken that bein' a tutor for the Laird's bairn is the best option ye have," her father said as he walked up to her from behind his desk, perching himself on the windowsill next to her. "Ye always wanted to do this, Etna. Dinna let some rumors stop ye."

“But everyone always says that the Laird is a terrible man,” Etna pointed out, looking at her father with wide, pleading eyes. “How can ye send me there when ye ken that?”

“Dinna listen to what everyone says,” Dougal told her, shaking his head. “I didna expect ye to believe what ye hear about the Laird. Ye ken how the people in these parts can be. Weel, I was his tutor when he was younger, and I ken that he’s a good man. I wouldna send ye to that castle if I thought that ye’d be in any sort of danger, Etna. I am askin’ ye to forget everythin’ that ye’ve heard about him until ye meet him yerself. Ye can make yer own judgment.”

“And ff me own judgment is the same as everyone else’s?” Etna asked.

With a sigh, Dougal patted her shoulder with a gentle hand. “Then ye’ll leave the castle and return here. I willna force ye to do anythin’ that ye dinna wish to do. I’m only askin’ ye to give the Laird a chance.”

The assurance that she could always return to her father put Etna at ease. It was good to know that if the Laird turned out to be a horrible man, she could always leave the castle, that she would always have a place with Dougal.

I should be grateful, really. I should be thankin’ him.

Her father had always been the most important person in her life, and he had always been so understanding, so accepting of everything that she wanted to do. He had taught her everything that she knew, and not once had he pressured her to marry. Some of her friends—bright, promising young women—had been lost to marriage, and she had no intention of heading down the same path.

And now, all that he was asking of her was to follow her dream to become a tutor, to guide a young life and teach it everything that she knew. She had the chance to do what she had always wanted to do, and she had almost turned it down because of some rumors.

"Alright," she said, a small smile spreading over her lips. "I suppose that I can go to the castle and see how it is to live there. But I'm warnin' ye, Faither . . . if I dinna like bein' there, I will leave."

"I have no doubts about that," her father said, giving her a smile of his own as he stood, heading back to his chair.

Etna watched him for a few moments. Though his brown hair had started to grey at the temples, his eyes were as bright as ever, the same green as her own. At fifty-five, he was still young and sprightly—though a little pudgy from avoiding manual work—but he had never been alone before in his life. Etna had always been there for him, and he had always been there for her. The two of them had been taking care of each other ever since her mother had passed, leaving them all alone.

Will he be alright on his own here? What if he needs me help? Me company? How am I to leave him all alone?

It was an excuse, Etna knew, but she didn't want to admit it. Unlike her, her father was quick to make a friend out of everyone he met, and he was anything but alone in the village. It was rare that it was just the two of them in the house, as people were coming in and out throughout the day, her father's guests, all of them seeking his company.

The truth was that she was lonelier than he was. She wasn't particularly shy, and she had had plenty of friends in Edinburgh, but the feelings of hopelessness had isolated her from those around her when she had moved to Beninroch, a remote little village three days' ride from Inverness. Now, she thought it was too late to make a good impression on her neighbors.

Perhaps a fresh start is precisely what I need. Goin' to the castle where no one kens who I am, where I may make some friends.

And after all, she could always visit her father. The castle wasn't that far from the village, and she would make it clear that as long as she tutored the Laird's daughter as agreed, she would be allowed

to do as she wished.

“When am I required to be there?” Etna asked her father. Now that the decision had been made, she would have to get everything in order before she could leave. Although what exactly there was for her to do in that house, in that village, she didn’t know. She simply didn’t want to leave before ensuring that her father would be fine.

“As soon as possible,” Dougal told her. “Ye can leave the morrow if ye so wish.”

“The morrow?” Etna exclaimed. “It’s much too soon, Faither. What about ye?”

“What about me?”

“Weel . . . we dinna have much wood left in the house, and what about meat and—”

Dougal stopped her by raising a finger, shushing her. “Etna, I am perfectly capable of getting me own wood and meat, lass. Ye dinna have to worry about me. Ye’ve worried about me for too long. It’s time that ye leave this place.”

Etna didn’t bother telling her father that as much as she wanted to leave the village, she didn’t particularly want to go to the MacAlistair clan castle. There was only one place where she wanted to go, and that was Edinburgh, as she knew that no matter where she went, as long as she was in the countryside, the people surrounding her would be close-minded. She had had enough of people who thought that she couldn’t teach because she was a woman and that the only thing she was good for was marriage. But the two of them had had many arguments about it, and she never did manage to reason with him. She was wasting her breath, repeating it to him, and so she remained silent.

But perhaps if I do weel with the Laird’s daughter, he will give me the means to go to Edinburgh. Perhaps, I could negotiate with him.

That thought grew in Etna's mind within moments, and suddenly, she had a plan. She would go to the castle, would do her best to teach the Laird's daughter, and, once she saved up enough money, she would finally go back home, to her *real* home, to Edinburgh. And by then, she thought, she would surely have the credentials to teach many other children, and she could bring her father with her. He wouldn't have to worry about his finances anymore.

"What are ye smilin' about?" her father asked her, pulling her out of her thoughts. When Etna looked at him, she noticed that he was smiling, too, as though her own smile was contagious.

"Nothin'," she lied. She decided that her father didn't need to know about her plans, in case he loved the village as much as she suspected, and tried to put an end to them. "I'm only thinkin' about the travel to the castle."

From the look that Dougal gave her, Etna thought that he didn't believe her, but thankfully he didn't push her for a more truthful answer. Instead, he went back to his papers, and Etna went back to her book, feeling happier than she remembered being in a while.

It wasn't only happiness, though, she noticed. It was hope too.

That night, she could hardly sleep, spending the hours staring at the ceiling and waiting for daylight to come. The prospect of returning to her beloved home had left her too excited to sleep, and all she could do was count the minutes until she could grab her horse and head to the castle.



At the first light of the morning, Etna stood from her bed, throwing the belongings that she needed in two bags. Before doing anything else, she headed to the study, knowing that her father would already be there.

She found him behind his desk, hunched over it. In front of him, he had her favorite book, the one that he read to her every night when she was young, and he didn't seem to notice her as she entered. Etna watched him in silence, a flood of emotions overtaking her.

She would miss her father terribly, and she knew that the same would be true for him. If he asked her to stay, Etna would, but she knew that he would never do that. He wanted her to find her own place in the world, he had told her once. He wanted her to live her own life, and that meant that she would eventually have to leave him behind, at least for a while.

When Dougal noticed her, it startled both of them. Etna didn't know how long she had been standing there, by the door, watching him, but she had forgotten that she was there.

"What are ye doin', lass?" her father asked, his hand clutching his chest in his fright. "Ye almost scared me to death."

"I didna want to bother ye," she told him with a small shrug.

"Ye're never a bother, Etna," he said, and his voice was quiet, as though even the smallest sound could shatter the moment between them. "Are ye ready, then?"

Etna nodded, the words sticking to her throat, refusing to come out. Dougal approached her with a small smile, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"Ye ken that na matter where ye are, ye'll always have me," he said. "And it willna be long until I see ye again. Once ye're settled, I'll come to visit ye."

“Promise?” It was all Etna could say, and even that one simple word sounded broken.

“I promise. Dinna fash yerself. The castle isna that far! I can visit ye, and ye can visit me.”

That promise lifted Etna’s spirits enough to bring a smile to her lips. As painful as it was to leave, she held onto that hope that she would see him again soon.

With that, her father let his hand fall off her shoulder, his gaze coming to rest on the two bags in her hands. He took both from her and began to walk to the door, nodding his head as an invitation for Etna to follow.

She could hardly believe that the time had come for her to leave. She let her father strap the saddle onto her horse and then the bags onto the saddle, the entire time searching for the right words to say, only to find that there were none. She didn’t know how to say goodbye. They had never been apart, and the time had come too soon.

I wish he could come with me. I’ll need him more than ever when I am in that castle.

Etna averted her gaze when her father approached her, wrapping his arms around her. She clung to him, but she didn’t dare look at him, knowing that the moment their eyes would meet, she wouldn’t be able to hold back the tears.

“I’ll miss ye, Faither,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady, even as her hands shook. “I’ll write to ye often, I promise.”

“I’ll miss ye, too,” her father said, and he sounded more emotional than Etna had ever heard him before. Once he let her go, she noticed that he, too, averted his gaze, and she wondered if it was something that she had inherited from him, that refusal to cry in front of others. “Weel . . . it’s time to go noo. Ye dinna want to be out all alone when it’s dark.”

Etna nodded in agreement, but her legs were lead and wouldn't move. Her father must have noticed as he gave her a small, sad smile and made his way out of the stables. Etna saw him head back to the house, and only then could she bring herself to mount her horse.

As she rode toward the edge of their property, she turned her head and looked back at the house. Her father stood in front of the door, waving at her.

She whispered a promise in the wind to see him again soon.

Chapter Two

“I just dinna understand how this always happens if there is na a traitor among us,” Finley said, slamming his fist onto his desk. “Every time we go after the brigands, they manage to escape. Every single time, Lochlan. We’ve never caught even one of them.”

Lochlan, his brother, stood with his back to Finley, staring out of the study window. Finley was the Laird of the MacAlistair clan, but he didn’t feel safe even in his own castle. His study was the only place left where the two could talk without Finley worrying that they would be heard by a traitor.

“I dinna ken what to tell ye,” Lochlan said with a heavy sigh. “I agree with ye, I do, but what are we to do? We’ve tried everythin’. I canna go to the men and accuse them of bein’ traitors!”

Lochlan was right, of course. Finley had refrained from making any accusations. Even though he wasn’t as close to the men as he used to be some years prior, he couldn’t imagine that any of them would betray him. He knew all those men ever since they were all children. It made no sense to him that one of them was a traitor, but it was the only logical conclusion he could reach.

“The clan is fallin’ apart in front of me own two eyes, and there isna a thing that I can do to stop it,” Finley said, his hand coming up to curl around a cup of wine that he had finished too soon. He tipped the carafe over it and found that empty, too, which only served to infuriate him even further. “I am their Laird, and I can do nothin’ but sit back and watch as those brigands destroy our lands.”

The look that Lochlan gave him was not one of pity, as Finley had been expecting, but rather one that spoke of how unimpressed he was. Despite his anger, Finley didn’t say anything. Even without speaking, he knew what Lochlan was thinking, and he knew that he had a point.

Ever since Anna, his dear wife, had passed, he had withdrawn from everything and everyone. The clansmen had no trust in him anymore. The village people in his land had no trust in him either, and he had heard of their unsavory nickname for him: *Beast*.

That was how they thought of him, and, perhaps, that was precisely what he was. The burden of the past he was carrying made him less and less human every day, chipping away at his soul.

“What do ye want me to do?” Lochlan asked. “Anythin’ ye want, I’ll do it. But we must come up with a plan before we accuse any of the men of bein’ a traitor to the clan.”

“Aye, I ken,” Finley assured him. “And I dinna have a good guess as to whom it could be. Yer guess is as good as mine. I can hardly believe that any of our men would do such a thing.”

Lochlan gave him a slow, understanding nod as he walked back to his chair, falling onto it with a sigh. “The most important thing right noo is to protect the villages. The brigands have been stealin’ from our people and killin’ our men for too long. They’ve tried to defend themselves, but there’s na much they can do. They’re na trained. They have na weapons. They are na match for the brigands.”

“We canna send men to every village,” Finley pointed out. “Perhaps we can spare a few and send them to the biggest ones, but there is na a thing we can do for the smaller ones unless we can finally fight them. But how will we fight them if they always run to the mountains?”

“We’ll find a way,” Lochlan assured him, but Finley could tell that he wasn’t as certain as he wanted to sound. “But Finley . . . ye *must* speak to the people. Ye’ve spent too long away from them. I’m surprised they even remember that ye’re their Laird.”

Finley shook his head. Lochlan already knew that he couldn’t do such a thing, and he also knew why. He couldn’t bear to be out there. He couldn’t bear to speak to anyone. Even though it had been

five years since his wife's death, it still haunted him, and he had not felt joy since. The mere thought of talking to his people, of touring the land and trying to get everyone to like him again, was exhausting. He would much rather stay in the castle and leave everything that had to do with people on Lochlan. After all, his brother had always been the social one, the one that constantly attracted people.

"Ye willna do it." It wasn't a question as much as a statement, and Finley looked up to see Lochlan shaking his head at him in disappointment.

"I canna."

"Ye willna," Lochlan insisted. "Weel . . . at least come with us on the hunt."

Finley frowned at that. "The hunt?" he asked. It was the first time that he was hearing of it. "What hunt, Lochlan?"

"Weel, me and a few of the lads are goin' huntin'," Lochlan said with a small shrug.

"Noo?" Finley asked. "Do ye really think it's a good time to be huntin'? I'd rather hunt the brigands than boars."

"Weel, ye canna hunt the brigands until they show their faces again," Lochlan pointed out. "And it's good for the men. It keeps them in shape. It'll do ye plenty of good, too, ye'll see. Ye'll get some fresh air."

"I can walk around the castle grounds to get fresh air, thank ye," Finley said, but the mischievous smile on Lochlan's lips told him that he wouldn't simply let it go. Finley knew his brother well; when he got an idea in his head, it was impossible to get it out. "Must I?"

"Na, but I think that ye should," Lochlan said. "Ye're the Laird . . . I

canna force ye to do anythin' ye dinna want."

"But?"

"But ye're also me brother, and I can annoy ye into comin' with us."

Finley knew that to be true. Reluctantly, he nodded his head, thinking that it would be easier to simply do as Lochlan wanted instead of fighting him over something so silly. Besides, perhaps it would be good for him in the end, he thought. He couldn't remember the last time that he had left the castle, and he certainly couldn't remember the last time that he had spoken to any of his men about anything other than clan business. *Ye have to bond with them*, Lochlan always said. *Ye have to show them that ye care*.

The truth was that Finley did care. He cared about his clan, about his people, and there had been a time when everyone had known that. There had been a time when no one called him Beast, when his people loved him, and the brigands feared him. There had been a time when he could look his clansmen in the eye. But that time was long gone, and now all was left was that guilt that was eating him up alive.

"Excellent," Lochlan said as he stood once more, this time heading for the door. "We'll be leavin' the morrow at first light, so make sure that ye get some rest tonight."

With that, Lochlan was gone, shutting the door behind him, and leaving Finley alone with his thoughts once more.

As much as he couldn't stand being around people, he also hated being alone. It meant that he had too much time to think, too much time to consider what could have been different if his wife was still alive, what he had lost. In all those five years, he had barely even managed to talk to his daughter, and it was only getting worse. He couldn't remember when he had last spoken to her. He had just left her in his grandmother's hands, letting her raise her as she saw fit.

I'm a failure. I canna even do that right.

At least his grandmother would raise Malina well, that much he knew for certain. She was the closest thing that the girl could have to a mother figure, after all, and Finley knew that she was better off with her than with him. He was in no condition to care for a child.

Finley drained the rest of the wine that Lochlan had left behind before retiring to his chambers. The room always seemed so big to him without Anna in it, and it was no different now. He was used to being all alone, though, and he preferred it that way. Most of his nights were sleepless, and the moment that his head hit the pillow, he knew that he wouldn't be resting much.



* * *

The morning came later than he would have liked, and by the time the first light broke in the horizon, Finley had slept very little after tossing and turning all night, like most nights. Still, he stood and dressed before heading outside to find Lochlan and the rest of the men who would join them on their hunt.

He wasn't surprised to find that none of them was there yet. Perhaps they were having breakfast, he thought, or perhaps they were still getting ready, but Finley didn't want to go back inside. At that time of the morning, the courtyard was still mostly empty, save for the few servants who were going about their day, having woken up before dawn. They didn't dare look at Finley, anyway, let alone talk to him. They all knew to not disturb him and always kept a good distance from him.

No one wanted to face his wrath.

Finley had to admit that he was short-tempered, but not as much as

those around him wanted to think. How could they have forgotten what he was like before Anna's death, he wondered? How could they all think that he was a monster now? He was not the same man, but he wasn't cruel.

"He came!" Lochlan exclaimed, his voice carrying across the courtyard. Finley turned his head to look at him and saw that there were six of their men with him, all of them ready for the day's adventure.

"I did," Finley said, as the men bowed in a chorus of "*Me Laird's*", rushing to greet him. They respected him, but it was a respect that stemmed from fear and knowing that left a bitter taste in Finley's mouth. "Ye did threaten to annoy me, and I ken that ye can, so I decided that this would be less painful."

"Only if ye dinna get run down by a boar, brother!"

Lochlan began to run to the stables, cheerful as always. Though he had the same blonde hair as Finley, he was shorter, and he had inherited their mother's honey-brown eyes. He had also inherited her charm and her joyful disposition, it seemed.

Finley envied him for that. No matter what, Lochlan always managed to see the bright side, not letting every bad thing that had happened to him weigh him down. Then again, his woes were nothing compared to Finley's own. He had never lost a wife. He had never had to carry a past that dragged him down daily. He didn't have a daughter that he couldn't face or people who hated him. He was loved by everyone, and though Finley sometimes envied him, he couldn't help but adore him, too.

Finley listened to his men as they chatted while they walked to the horses. Once they were on their way, he fell in step next to Lochlan, who was already loud and lively, shouting with a cheer that seemed inexhaustible.

It had been a long time since Finley had banned his clansmen and women singing and laughing in the hopes that he wouldn't have to

be constantly reminded about everyone else's happiness when he was so unhappy. And yet, Lochlan always found a way to let everyone know just how jolly he was, much to Finley's chagrin.

"Me Laird!" Lochlan yelled, startling Finley. "Would ye care for the finest wine that our clan has to offer?"

Finley rolled his eyes at his brother, but he took the flask that he had offered to him. It never did any good to refuse a good wine, or bad wine, for that matter. Taking a swig, Finley passed the flask back to him, wincing at the burn in his throat.

"That's na wine," he told Lochlan.

With a frown, Lochlan looked at the flask. "Na?" he asked. "Ach, it might be whiskey. Weel, it's better than water, that's for certain!"

Finley gave his brother an unimpressed look. Lochlan was one of the two people—the other being their grandmother—who wasn't afraid of him, and so his look didn't have much of an effect on him, but it was enough to stop the conversations among the other men. They all fell silent, and Finley soon found that he preferred it that way.

His men knew better than to look at him, but in the sudden silence, Finley felt exposed. There was nothing to distract them anymore, and so he pulled his hood over his head, eager to hide. The scar that he had gotten on his face the day that Anna died wasn't something that he wanted people to see, not even the people closest to him.

He didn't even want to look at himself in the mirror anymore. The scar was a constant reminder of what Anna had done.

"This is a good spot," Finley heard Lochlan say, and they all stopped, dismounting their horses, and tying the reins around the nearby trees. It wasn't much later when they spotted a boar in the distance, and Finley immediately rushed toward it, disregarding the warnings that everyone yelled after him. He knew that hunting boars was a dangerous sport, but he had done it many times before.

And a part of him simply didn't care.

Running after the animal gave him a rush that he hadn't felt in a long time. He felt alive again, his mind ridding itself of every other thought. All that mattered at that moment was that boar and his own survival. His baser instincts took over, providing momentary relief from the endless noise that were his thoughts and worries.

He couldn't hear any of his men behind him. He didn't know if they were there, if they had followed him or if they had lost him in the woods as they ran. All he knew was that nothing would stand between him and that boar.

Chapter Three

Traveling alone in the countryside was nicer than Etna had expected. She had never ventured so far out alone before, but she found the peace and quiet of the woods to be very calming. If there was one thing that she worried about, though, that was brigands.

She shook and trembled at the thought that a group of men could attack her at any moment. If she'd only have to fight one of them, perhaps she would make it, but an entire gang of brigands would be impossible to fight off on her own. It was that fear of the brigands that could be lurking in the shadows that made Etna glance behind her shoulder every now and then, whenever the road became too quiet.

Despite liking her solitude, a part of her wished that she had a companion to make her feel safer.

And just as she turned her head to face forward again, she saw something rush in front of her, though she couldn't tell what it was. The creature spooked her horse, a mare that had never been calm to begin with, and as she neighed in fear and reared, forehooves flailing wildly.

Etna's heart hammered in her chest as she felt herself slip out of the saddle. No matter how much she tried to hold onto the reins with her hands and onto the horse with her thighs, it seemed impossible. Etna fell off, shutting her eyes tightly as she braced for the impact.

But it never came. Her back never hit the ground, and though the breath was knocked out of her, she soon realized that she had fallen onto something much softer than the bare earth.

It took her a few moments to see that she was in the arms of a man. He seemed to have rushed to her, softening her fall and pulling her

away from the hooves of her horse, which had, by then, run off to the edge of the path.

When Etna turned to look at her savior, she saw nothing but shadows, his face obscured by a hood. She could tell that he was a big man, though, tall, and muscular, with arms that wrapped entirely around her.

“Oh, thank ye!” Etna exclaimed as the man pulled her up to her feet. She dusted off her *earasaid*, trying to get as much dirt off it as she could, and then turned to the strange man once more. “I canna thank ye enough, ye saved me life.”

“Na need to thank me.”

Before Etna could say anything else, the man turned around and ran back into the woods with such speed that he disappeared behind the tree line in seconds. She frowned to herself. Where had the man come from, she wondered? And why was he in such a rush to get away from her?

Etna shook her head, thanking God that it wasn't a brigand. Whoever that man was, as strange as he was, he had saved her, and she would always be grateful for it.

Once her fright had subsided, Etna walked to her horse, calming it down before she mounted it again to resume her journey. From there, it didn't take her long until she saw the castle that was to be her home for the foreseeable future.

After living in the village for so long, Etna had forgotten what it was like to see such grand, imposing buildings. The castle rose from a verdant valley, its turrets so high that they seemed to touch the sky. Near the castle was a flowing river that ended in a glittering lake, the little sun that peeked through the clouds shining on its surface.

The closer she got to the castle, though, the more the sight confused her. She could see that all the windows had been boarded up, and it

would have looked abandoned had it not been for the two guards that stood outside the gates.

What kind of place is this?

When the guards stopped her, Etna handed them the letter that the Laird had sent her father. As the gates opened for her, she began to see that the castle was even stranger than she had first thought.

There were people in the courtyard, many of them, in fact. Some were soldiers, others were servants, but they all had the same, solemn look on their faces. Nobody even dared to look up, their gazes fixed on the ground in front of them. The courtyard was bare, not a single flower in sight, and Etna could have sworn that the castle itself was darker than the area surrounding it, as though a cloud hung perpetually above it.

A dark castle for a dark man. It's na wonder it looks like this if the Laird is anythin' like people say.

“Ye must be Etna. Welcome!”

The voice was a cheerful lilt, a breath of fresh air in the darkness of the castle. Etna turned to see a man there, with blonde hair, brown eyes, and a handsome face. He was clean-shaven, and that only added to the childlike quality of that face, which still clung onto its youthful, rosy cheeks. He seemed to be at odds with his surroundings, his very presence radiating joy.

“I’m Lochlan MacAlistair,” the man said, and from the looks of it, he, too, had just gotten there, along with some other men. They were all taking their belongings from their horses, and as Etna watched them, she saw that the rest of them were just as moody and serious as the people she had seen coming in the courtyard. The only one who differed was Lochlan.

Etna bowed at the man, giving him a small, hesitant smile. Was she even allowed to smile? Would there be a terrible punishment waiting for her?

“Ye’ve been waitin’ for me, then?” Etna asked. “I suppose that I am to report to the Laird?”

“Och, na,” Lochlan said. “Me brother is a busy man. If there’s anythin’ that ye need, ye can ask me or our grandmaither, Arlene. She oversees wee Malina’s education, so I’m sure she can help ye with anythin’ ye need.”

What kind of man doesna take the time to care about his bairn’s education?

The first impression that Etna got matched what everyone else had been saying for so long: the Laird wasn’t a good man. She was certain that no one was smiling because of him and that all that darkness, all that heavy atmosphere, came from the very man who was supposed to lead them to prosperity.

But naturally, Etna didn’t voice any of those concerns to Lochlan.

“How is yer faither?” Lochlan asked, breaking the silence that had fallen between them. “I remember him verra weel, ye ken. Finley and I both love yer faither dearly. He taught us for years.”

It was strange for Etna to hear that the Laird—*Finley*—loved her father. She could believe it was true for Lochlan, as the man seemed to be pleasant, with plenty of love to go around. She wondered if the same was true for the Laird, despite what everyone said about him. After all, her father had described him as a very nice young man.

“He’s weel,” she assured Lochlan. “He’s told me about his time teachin’ ye, and he says that he wishes to visit soon.”

“He’d be more than welcome to come anytime,” Lochlan said. “I’ve missed him, and I’m sure that the Laird has missed him, too. Weel, if ye’re even a wee bit like yer faither, then Malina is in good hands.”

"I can assure ye that I'll do my verra best," Etna said. "It is me first time tutorin' a bairn, but I'll teach her everythin' I ken. Everythin' me faither taught me."

Lochlan gave her a wide smile before he offered Etna his arm, which she gladly took. "I'll take ye to meet me grandmaither. She's the one in charge, after all, and I'm sure that she wants to meet ye."

As Lochlan guided Etna through the castle, the feeling of despair only settled heavier on her shoulders. Inside the castle, the servants and the clansmen were even more morose, as though merely being there drained every last bit of happiness from them. No one even greeted her or met her gaze, and she stiffened against Lochlan, her discomfort clear in her posture.

"Dinna worry," Lochlan told her, his voice a low whisper. "It isna as bad as it seems."

"Why is na one even lookin' at me?"

Lochlan sighed a heavy, weary sound. "Me brother has banned everyone from unnecessary talk, smilin', laughin', singin' . . . havin' any joy, really. But dinna hold it against him. He has his reasons."

Etna couldn't imagine what reasons anyone could have to forbid those around him from *smiling*, of all things. Smiles came naturally to her, and she couldn't imagine how she would even survive there if the Laird had explicitly forbidden any form of joy.

Besides, Lochlan had smiled several times since Etna had first met him. Just because he was the Laird's brother, it didn't mean that he could be the only one in the entire castle who smiled.

"What about Malina?" she asked. "Is she allowed to smile?"

Lochlan huffed out a soft laugh at that. "Aye, I suppose she is."

As he spoke, he opened the door to a spacious study. That room had

open windows, Etna noticed, and the afternoon sun bathed it in soft light. Behind a carved desk sat an older woman, her hair white as snow and her eyes the same color as Lochlan's.

"Ye must be Etna," the woman said, standing with surprising agility for someone her age. She walked up to Etna, placing one hand on her shoulder and one on her cheek, and her stare was scrutinizing, boring into her. "Ye look just like yer faither, ye ken. Incredible similarity."

"Excuse me grandmaither's familiarity," Lochlan said, teasing his grandmother.

"I'm an old woman," she replied. "I dinna have time for formal introductions. Etna, dear, call me Arlene. Lochlan, leave us, please, lad."

At his grandmother's request, Lochlan gave Etna a bow before disappearing, closing the door of the study behind him. Etna watched Arlene as she walked back to her chair and then took her own seat across her in a large red armchair.

"Thank ye for acceptin' me offer to come here," Arlene said.

"Yer offer? I . . . I dinna understand."

Her father had told Etna that the Laird had asked for her specifically. How was it that Arlene was telling her a different story now?

"Aye," Arlene confirmed. "I sent that letter to yer faither, askin' him to send ye to us. As I said, I'm an old woman, and I canna take care of Malina alone anymore. Lochlan helps, but the lad is of age to have his own family, and Malina needs a formal education. She needs a proper tutor."

"What about the Laird?" Etna asked. "Does he ken that I'm here? Did he . . . did he na ask for me?"

Arlene gave her a curious glance. "The Laird doesna ken ye're here," she said. "Is that what yer faither told ye?"

She seemed amused, though Etna was anything but. "Aye. He said that the Laird invited me personally."

"He always kent how to handle people, yer faither," Arlene said. "But na matter. I invited ye here, and so ye are more than welcome. I hope that this doesna change anythin' for ye."

Etna could hardly believe that her father had tricked her. He had never lied to her before, at least as far as she knew. Were there other things that he had lied about, she wondered? And if so, just how many lies had he told her?

She couldn't think about such things, not in front of Arlene. She wanted to remain polite, and she doubted that her anger would allow her to do that. And so, she pushed that anger deep down, where she wouldn't have to think about it until she was alone.

"Na. Na, it doesna," she told Arlene. "I still have a job to do."

"Perfect. Ye'll start first thing the morrow, then," Arlene said. "I'll take ye to meet Malina. I'm sure that ye'll love her; she's a bonnie wee lassie. I've taught her everythin' I could, so she already kens plenty for her age."

The two of them spoke about Malina some more, and Etna learned that she was seven years old, that her mother had died tragically, and that she already spoke some French and loved horses. Hearing about Malina reminded Etna of herself when she was young, and she felt an attachment developing before she had even met her. She only hoped that Malina would like her and want her as her tutor.

The light had faded from the sky by the time that Etna heard a knock on the door. When she turned to look, she saw Lochlan there, accompanied by a young woman—a maid.

"I think it's time for Etna to retire to her chambers," Lochlan told his grandmother, who nodded fervently.

"Aye, it's me own time, too," she said as she stood. Etna followed suit, but Arlene stopped her with a hand on her shoulder before she could leave. "The library is on the ground floor, at the end of the corridor by the stairs. And do yerself a favor, lass . . . keep away from the west wing."

Before Etna had time to ask what was wrong with the west wing, Arlene was saying goodnight to everyone, leaving her with Lochlan and the maid. Etna decided it was better to not ask; eventually, she would find out.

"Dinna look so worried, Etna," Lochlan said, giving her a reassuring smile as the three of them walked out of the room. "Mairi here will take ye to yer chambers, and ye'll see that the morrow, everythin' will seem a little brighter."

Etna very much doubted that, but she didn't confess that to Lochlan. Instead, she nodded and bid him goodnight, following the maid to her new bedroom.

Once the door was closed, the dam opened. Etna couldn't hold back the tears that welled in her eyes.

She couldn't imagine how anyone could live there. She couldn't imagine being so sad, so hopeless every single day.

Etna threw herself onto her bed, crying herself to sleep and thinking that Lochlan was wrong. It could only get worse.

Chapter Four

When Etna awoke the following morning, the sun had barely broken through the horizon. Her room was softly illuminated by the morning light, and though she tried to sleep some more, exhausted as she was from the trip and from the hours she had spent crying, she found that she couldn't. Her despair settled over her once more, and so did the concern for the days, the weeks, the months that were to follow.

How will I survive here? It's a terrible place to live!

With a sigh, Etna stood from the bed and dressed quickly, though the thought of going out of her chambers and into that dark, quiet castle made her want to crawl right back into bed. She had her breakfast alone and then spent some time walking around the courtyard, trying to engage those around her in conversation.

No one seemed to want to talk to her for more than a few moments, and any smiles that she exchanged were quickly hidden. Etna didn't know what to make of it all, and not knowing only served to infuriate her more.

"Me lady . . . please follow me to the library," said the same woman who had shown her to her chambers the previous night—Mairi, Etna reminded herself. She was a beautiful young woman with lustrous brown hair and bright brown eyes, but she, too, seemed stern and severe. Etna followed her, the two of them staying quiet the entire way to the library, and once they were there, Mairi simply pointed at the door before leaving.

Etna knocked and stepped inside, only to find the sweetest little girl in the room.

Malina.

Malina looked like a cherub from a painting, with her blonde hair and blue eyes and those rosy cheeks that Etna just wanted to pinch. She was nestled in one of the grand armchairs in the room, a heavy book in her lap, and when she heard Etna enter the library, she looked up shyly at her.

Etna gave the girl a smile as she approached her, crouching down next to her.

“Ye must be Malina,” she said. “I’m Etna. Yer uncle told me that ye’re a verra clever and verra bonnie lassie.”

Malina watched Etna intently, but she didn’t reply to her. But Etna could see that the girl was only shy, and she hoped that she could help her come out of her shell with a bit of effort.

“What are ye readin’, Malina?” she asked her, and the girl rotated the book in her lap so that Etna could read it. It was a book about the clan’s history, Etna saw, and she wondered if Malina even found it interesting. It was an odd book for a child her age to be reading. “Do ye like this book?”

Malina gave Etna a small shrug and flipped the book once more, ignoring her.

Does this library even have any books for her? Or is it all history and strategy?

There was a time for history, of course, and a time for strategy—though Etna was hardly the person to teach Malina any of that—but there were other, far more fascinating books that Etna wanted to give her. Thankfully, she had brought some of her own, and she was certain that Malina would enjoy them.

“Do ye wish to look at the books that I have brought ye?” Etna asked in another effort to get the girl to speak. And speak she did, but she didn’t give the answer that Etna had been expecting.

“Nay,” she said as she pinned Etna with a glare. “Can I go to Nanna noo?”

It suddenly became clear to her that working with Malina wouldn’t be as easy as she had originally thought. She was not only shy; she didn’t like her. But Etna could hardly blame her. She remembered what it was like to be her age and to pass through set after set of hands. Her father had been absent often due to his profession, and her mother, in her desire to give her the best education and start in life that she could, had often left her to the care of tutors.

Etna tried to think back to what had made her like some of her own tutors. Having her father there at the beginning had helped, and Etna wondered if she could convince the Laird to attend some of their classes.

But in the time she had been there, short as it was, she hadn’t had the chance to meet the Laird. Etna thought it was odd that he didn’t even want to meet his daughter’s tutor, that he didn’t feel the need to ensure that Malina was in good hands. She didn’t dare ask anyone else about him, but she didn’t see what the harm would be if she asked Malina. Besides, it seemed to Etna that if there was anyone to whom the Laird would be kind, it would be her.

“Malina . . . do ye want to tell me about yer faither? What is he like?” Etna asked.

Malina ignored her once more. She seemed to be engrossed in the book that she was reading, but Etna knew better than to think her interest in it was genuine.

“Is he here? In the castle?” Etna asked, still trying to get her to speak, but once again, Malina remained silent.

Perhaps it’s better to na ask her anythin’ else about him.

But who could Etna ask? Lochlan, perhaps, but Lochlan seemed to have a way of deflecting any questions regarding the Laird. He always told Etna to not worry, but how could she not worry when

there seemed to be something strange going on in that castle?

In the end, she pushed all those thoughts away. It wasn't the time for them, she decided. She had to focus on Malina instead and to ensure that she was comfortable.

"I have an idea," she told the little girl as she offered her hand. "How about we go for a walk?"

Before she took Etna's hand, Malina hesitated for a moment, something that didn't surprise Etna. As much as Malina didn't like her, she was certain that she didn't want to be in that castle any more than she did, and so the prospect of a walk was attractive enough to make Malina accept Etna's company. "Are ye sure we can?" she asked.

"Of course!" Etna said. "Why na?"

Malina gave her a small shrug, and Etna didn't push her for an answer. In a few moments, Malina gave an answer on her own, just as Etna had thought.

"I havena been out for a while. Na out of the courtyard. Nanna says she's too old to go out of the castle with me, and Uncle Lochlan is always busy."

Etna let out a heavy sigh, shaking her head to herself. "Weel . . . noo that I'm here, we can go out every day."

Malina stayed silent, but Etna saw that she got a spring to her step as they walked. She didn't expect her to warm up to her any time soon, but the walks would surely help.

She couldn't imagine how trapped Malina must have felt in that castle. Etna had only been there for a day, and she could hardly breathe, the atmosphere within those walls suffocating. Spending too much time cooped up in there sounded like a nightmare to Etna, and it was certainly not healthy for a child.

Once they were out of the castle walls, a weight lifted off her shoulders. It was a beautiful day, but she wouldn't have known had she stayed inside, as almost all the windows in the castle were covered. There was a gentle breeze, and the few clouds in the sky cast playful shadows on the ground. The scent of grass was unmissable, permeating the air around them, and Etna couldn't help but smile the moment her feet touched the path that led out into the countryside.

"How about we go to the loch?" she asked Malina, and the girl was eager to agree, nodding fervently. Etna had seen the loch on her way to the castle, and she hadn't stopped thinking about it since. It had looked so inviting, its calm waters shining under the sun.

Once they got to the lake, Etna noticed that it was much larger than she had originally thought. Dipping her hand in the water, she saw that it was chilly, but not unbearably so. With Malina next to her, Etna taught her about the plants that grew around the lake, the flowers, the herbs, and the bushes, and it wasn't long before she realized that Malina was an attentive student, even though she made certain to antagonize her whenever she could.

Once again, Etna was reminded of herself.

When Etna had told Malina everything she knew about the plants, she watched her run around, playing with the grass and the water, and by the end of it all, she was sweaty and muddy and in desperate need of a bath.

Returning to the castle seemed to be as hard for Etna as it was for Malina. Neither of them wanted to go back, but it was getting dark, and Etna didn't want to risk staying out for too long. Once they were inside the walls, the feeling of despair returned, and so did Malina's sour mood. When the maids took her for a bath, Malina didn't even say goodbye to Etna.

I'll make her warm up to me. I will. I willna let her waste away in this castle.

That night, when Etna settled into bed, she couldn't get the thought of the Laird out of her mind. Everything about that castle bothered her, and she wished that there would be some way to find the Laird, to speak to him and give him a piece of her mind. Something *had* to change. She couldn't even understand how the rest of the clan put up with the man's behavior, and she wondered why they hadn't replaced him yet. Surely, a man like him didn't inspire any confidence in his people.

Then again, perhaps they were all afraid of him. It wouldn't surprise her. The Laird seemed to have such power over everyone, and that kind of power could only be gained through fear.

Nothing changed in the days that followed. Etna spent her days with Malina, and she would often see Arlene, too, who seemed to have a great interest in her great-granddaughter's education. Every now and then, she would also see Lochlan, but the man was usually busy with other things.

The routine helped Etna adjust to her new life. She came to know to expect the same thing every day, the same drabness and gloominess, the same frigidness from Malina, and in the end, she even stopped thinking much about the Laird. It was clear that the man wouldn't show his face any time soon—if ever—and so she stopped expecting to see him.

It was only two weeks after her arrival when she heard about the Laird once more. It was late in the evening, and she was walking to the library when she heard a sound that she could only imagine was the sobs of a woman. Alarmed, Etna began to approach the source of the sound, but before she could find the woman, she heard her speak.

"Please, dinna make me go there again," the woman said. She sounded young and terrified, and Etna paused to listen. "I've brought him dinner three times this week. I canna go there again."

"I dinna want to go, either!" another woman said. "Na one of us wants to be in the same room as the Beast, noo, do we? But we do it

anyway.”

“I’m beggin’ ye, dinna make me do it.” The woman sounded so rattled that Etna had half a mind to take the dinner to the Laird herself and, while she was at it, ask him why he was being so terrible to everyone, to the point that the maids were so afraid of him. “I’ll do anythin’ . . . anythin’ but that.”

Etna didn’t stay to hear how the matter was resolved. Instead, she decided to track down the Laird since it seemed like he was there. As she walked through the castle corridors, she remembered what Arlene had told her: avoid the west wing. Surely, the only reason why she would tell her that was because the west wing belonged to the Laird. Whether it was a warning to not bother him, or to save herself from his presence, she didn’t know. All that she knew was that there was something very wrong with the man.

What if something truly sinister was taking place in that castle, Etna wondered? Whatever it was, she wanted to get to the bottom of it, and she wouldn’t rest until she did. If there was one thing that she couldn’t stand, that was injustice, and it seemed to her as though the castle was full of it.

When she got to the west wing, she found that it was even darker than the rest of the castle. There weren’t even any torches on the walls, and she wondered how anyone could see where they were going. The place looked abandoned in the dark, and a musty smell permeated every wall that surrounded her, as though the west wing hadn’t seen any fresh air for months.

Then again, she reasoned, that was very likely.

There was something strange about the west wing, and she felt as though she was being followed, but there was no way to know for certain. Even when her eyes adjusted to the dark, she could hardly see anything.

Perhaps, I willna find anythin’ like this. How am I supposed to ken where the doors even are if I canna see?

She decided that she would have to return the following day, armed with a torch and a little more courage. But just as she was about to turn around and try to find her way back, she saw Lochlan rushing down the corridor that ran perpendicular to the one where she was. Though Lochlan didn't notice her, Etna was certain it was him after seeing his face illuminated by the torch he was holding.

He was certain to have some answers for her, she thought. If she couldn't find the Laird, then Lochlan would have to give her an explanation.

Etna followed him, but the man was in such a hurry that she soon lost him. Once again, she was left in the dark, and now she didn't even know where she was. Finding her way back to the main part of the castle would be almost impossible, but she could hardly stay where she was.

With a sigh, she turned around to retrace her steps. But just as she was about to head back, an arm shot out through the darkness, grabbing her, and Etna felt the cold press of a blade against her throat.

Chapter Five

There was a traitor among them. Finley was certain of that. He didn't know who it could be, but he was certain that someone was giving information to the brigands, and he would be damned if he let another attack take place.

He was getting desperate. He would do anything to catch the traitor, even blame and question his own men.

Perhaps they had been loyal to him once, he thought, but he had been so withdrawn from everything and everyone that he didn't know any of them anymore. They were no better than strangers to him, and he worried that perhaps one of them—or even some of them—resented him for not being a better leader and had decided that riches were more valuable than their loyalty.

Lochlan had told him that he was being paranoid, but Finley wouldn't hear any of it. Still, Lochlan was the only one that he could trust in that castle, and so that night, he arranged to have a meeting with him in the west wing of the castle, which he hardly ever left.

On his way to his study, he noticed some movement from the corner of his eye. Whoever was there, they had chosen to remain in the shadows, and the first thing that Finley thought was that he had finally caught the spy. Extinguishing his torch, Finley began to follow that shadow, eager to see where the spy was going.

It soon occurred to him that there was no reason to the spy's movements, but then again, it was easy to get lost in the west wing if one didn't know where they were going. And so, Finley plastered himself against a wall and watched intently until the spy moved again, coming closer to him.

And then he jumped, his hand pulling out his *sgian-dubh* and pressing it tightly against the man's throat.

Only it soon became clear to him that it wasn't a man. Though his victim was tall, as tall as some of his men, she was also slender, with feminine curves.

And the feel of the corset under his hand was a good hint, much like the high-pitched scream that followed.

"Stop screamin'," Finley barked in her ear, bringing his hand up to cover the woman's mouth. He wondered who the woman was. The maids knew better than to roam in the west wing, and besides, if it was one of them, she would have known to bring a torch. "Who are ye? Reveal yerself!"

The woman's muffled scream turned into muffled words, and Finley removed his hand slowly in case she tried to scream again.

"Me name's Etna," the woman said. "I am Malina's new tutor. Please, I didna mean to—"

"Silence," Finley hissed. Malina's tutor? How stupid did the woman think that he was to believe such a lie? "Are ye a spy? And before ye deny it, let me remind ye of this," he said, as he pressed the blade harshly against her throat.

"I'm na spy!" Etna cried. "I'm Dougal's daughter, your tutor's daughter, please . . . I'm tellin' ye the truth. I came here two weeks ago, and I have been teachin' Malina ever since. Arlene . . . Arlene kens who I am, and so does Lochlan. I'm tellin' ye the truth. If ye would only ask them . . ."

Etna's words trailed off, and Finley felt her shake against him. Her terror did nothing to soften him, though, especially since his rage at not being informed about this new addition to the castle overtook him.

“How dare they na consult me before they make a decision about me own bairn?” he asked, talking more to himself rather than to Etna. “Damn them! Damn them all! They think that they can make decisions without me? They think that they can get away with na tellin’ me what happens in me own castle?”

“Please, me Laird . . . please, let me go, I’m beggin’ ye,” Etna said, and this time, Finley truly noticed for the first time just how scared of him she was. She was trembling uncontrollably, and Finley could hear her snuffle in the dark.

With a sigh, he lowered his blade slowly and then noticed for the first time how close he was to her. Etna smelled of chamomile and lavender, and she was warm and supple against him. It was a feeling that he hadn’t experienced in a long time, and though his body was reacting to her, he wanted nothing to do with such desires. He had to stop his hand from moving on its own accord, eager to explore Etna’s body.

Finley pushed Etna away, and he heard her stumble a few steps away from him. “We willna be needin’ yer services anymore,” he told her. “A female tutor? What use will ye be?”

Even though Finley couldn’t see the woman, he could tell from the short breath that she drew that her entire attitude changed and, with it, the atmosphere in the corridor.

“I’ll have ye ken that I am just as capable as any other tutor,” Etna told him, and he could hear in her voice that all her previous fright was gone and was instead replaced by fury. “In fact, I’d go as far as to say that I am much better than many tutors out there who happen to be men. And forgive me, *me Laird*, but since ye are na involved in Malina’s education anyway, I dinna see how ye can make such a decision. I believe the decision should be made by Arlene, who was the one who invited me here in the first place.”

Finley’s anger bubbled over inside him at the woman’s words. Especially the way that she had said his title, with such disdain and no hint of respect, infuriated him.

“Malina is me daughter. Mine. I’m the only one who should be makin’ these decisions for her,” he insisted.

“And yet ye havena been doin’ any of that,” Etna shot back.

Much to his chagrin, Finley had nothing to say to that. Etna was right; he hadn’t been involved in Malina’s education for the past two years. In fact, he had barely spoken to her. All the weight had fallen on his grandmother, and he had neglected his duties to her for a long time.

But he wasn’t about to admit any of that. He had enough on his plate, as it were, and he had no desire to argue with someone he didn’t even know.

“I am the Laird of this clan, and my word is the law here,” he told Etna, his voice a low, dangerous hiss. “I dinna care what ye or anyone else thinks. Ye’re to pack yer bags and leave at first light.”

“If ye had any desire to listen to anyone, at all, ye would ken that I’m na only an excellent tutor, but that Arlene wants me here,” Etna said.

“Listen to me closely, if ye think—”

“Finley.”

His name was a curt warning, and Finley turned to see Lochlan standing there, at the end of the corridor. He had been so involved in the heated argument with Etna that he hadn’t even noticed the light from Lochlan’s torch, and he wished that he hadn’t interrupted them.

“Etna, please, come,” Lochlan said, and Finley felt, rather than saw, Etna walk away from him and toward Lochlan. “Here, take the torch. Go down this corridor, take a right, and go down the stairs. It’ll take ye to the kitchens, and ye can go to yer chambers from there.”

“Thank ye, Lochlan,” Etna said as she took the torch, but Lochlan stopped her with a hand on her shoulder before she could leave.

“And dinna come to the west wing again,” he said. “Please . . . it’s better for everyone if ye stay away.”

Finley saw Etna nod in agreement before she disappeared, leaving him and his brother in darkness, but they both knew the castle so well that they didn’t need to see where they were going. Finley heard Lochlan approach him, and then he began to walk toward his study once more, with Lochlan following close behind.

“Ye didna have to be so harsh with her,” Lochlan said.

“Why did na one tell me that she was here, hmm?” Finley demanded. “Why did I na ken any of this? Malina is me daughter. Ye should have told me about it.”

“When was the last time we spoke about Malina?” Lochlan asked. “When was the last time we spoke about anythin’ other than brigands and spies? It’s all ye care about noo.”

Finley sighed, but he didn’t say anything. There was nothing that he could say, after all, as everything that Lochlan had told him was true. He hadn’t given Malina—or anything else, for that matter—any attention for a long time.

“Let her stay,” Lochlan continued. “Malina needs someone to teach her. Our grandmaither is too old for this, Finley . . . and Etna is doin’ a great job with her.”

“Does Malina like her?” Finley asked. Every other tutor they had brought had been terrorized by her until they had quit.

“Na, but she’ll grow to like her,” Lochlan assured him. “Etna kens how to handle her.”

Finley had half a mind to kick Etna out just because of

stubbornness, but he supposed that it wouldn't be fair to anyone if he did such a thing. Besides, if she was the only one who could handle Malina, he could hardly afford to send her away.

"And she can help ye with the clan," Lochlan added.

That was something that Finley couldn't possibly believe. "How is a tutor goin' to help me with the clan, Lochlan?"

"Everyone thinks ye're a madman, Finley. There, I said it. And if Etna grows to like ye, maybe she can help ye build a better reputation, dinna ye think?"

It all sounded like too much work to Finley. He didn't need people to like him. What he needed was to keep them all safe.

"Och, there's nothin' wrong with me reputation, Lochlan," he told his brother, even though it was a blatant lie. "What does it matter if they like me or na? Our problem noo are the brigands."

"How will ye fight the brigands without an army?" Lochlan asked. "Most of the men refuse to join the army. They dinna want to fight for ye because they think ye've gone mad."

"Aye, they're na wrong."

Lochlan let out a long-suffering sigh just as Finley opened the door to his study and the two of them walked inside. It was brighter there, the room lit by a few candles, and Finley could see for the first time that night just how tired Lochlan looked.

Finley poured them both a drink, handing one of the cups to Lochlan, who promptly drained it. "Ye're na a madman," Lochlan said. "Ye're just . . . weel, ye're just grieving still. And that is fine, but ye can grieve without scarin' everyone else away."

"Ye're still here," Finley pointed out.

“Aye, but I dinna want to fight two dozen brigands on me own.”

Though he hated to admit it, even to himself, Finley knew that Lochlan was right. He didn’t show it, but knowing that his people didn’t trust him, that they didn’t want him to lead the army, was hurtful.

But how can I blame them? They all think I’m mad, and they’re na wrong, na matter what Lochlan says.

And then there was the matter of Malina. He doubted that anyone apart from Lochlan and their grandmother would believe him, but he loved Malina more than anything in the world. He would do anything for her—anything but talk to her. He didn’t want her to see him like that. Not only was his mood etched on his features, in the scraggly beard and the dark circles under his eyes, but he also had that scar, that disfigurement that was certain to scare her.

It was the last thing that he wanted.

“Ye said that she’s a good tutor for Malina, then?” he asked Lochlan.

“Aye . . . and if ye gave her a chance, maybe ye’d grow to like her,” Lochlan said.

Remembering how he had felt in that corridor when Etna had been pressed up against him, made Finley choke on his wine, even though he knew that wasn’t what Lochlan meant. Though he would have to avoid such situations—which wouldn’t be difficult, since he doubted that he would ever be that close to her again—he decided that the best course of action was to allow Etna to stay.

“Fine,” he said in the end, a sigh escaping his lips as he threw himself on his chair, splashing some of his wine onto him. “Fine, the lass can stay. Anythin’ new about the brigands?”

He and Lochlan spoke about nothing but the brigands and plans

they thought they were making for the next few hours, talking well into the night. By the time that Lochlan left for his chambers and Finley retired to his own, he was exhausted, but sleep evaded him, as usual.

Only this time, his thoughts revolved around Etna. He had heard that Dougal, his beloved tutor, had a daughter, but he had always assumed that she was much younger than him. He had never imagined that she would one day become the tutor of his own daughter.

He had half a mind to invite Dougal to the castle, but the mere thought of socializing with anyone was enough to tire him out. Besides, he had more important issues to attend to, and guests were the least of his concerns.

When Finley finally fell asleep, he didn't dream of brigands for the first time in a while. Instead, he dreamed of the scent of chamomile and lavender.

Chapter Six

Etna's heart hadn't stopped its pounding by the time she made it back to her chambers that night. Her encounter with the Laird had left her terrified, and she didn't even know where she had gotten the courage and the nerve to speak to him like that.

She had been terribly rude. What if the Laird threw her out of the castle?

But I only said the truth. If he canna handle the truth, then that's on him.

She was tired of people who thought she couldn't be a good tutor because she was a woman. She knew for certain that she could teach just as well as her father, and she had all the proof she needed in Malina, who was making great progress with her.

Etna had been so scared by the Laird that it didn't occur to her that she had met him before well after their meeting. The more she thought about it, though, the more certain she was that he was the man who had saved her when she fell off her horse on the way to the castle.

She could hardly believe it, but she had recognized his voice. She was certain it was him.

Even though the man had left in a rush and had been quite rude, he had saved her life—or at least he had saved her from certain injury. How could that same man be so meanspirited to her now? How could it be as easy for him to pull out a knife as it was to save her?

It was as though he was two different people, and the whole situation confused Etna. She didn't know what to think of the Laird. She had heard both that he was a monster, the Beast of the castle

and that he was a good man, and she had experienced both sides of him herself.

But which one is his true side?

Etna didn't know, and she had a suspicion that she would never find out, not with how the Laird avoided everyone. She doubted that she would ever even see him again.

That very night, she decided to write a letter to her father. He had been the one to insist that the Laird was a good man, that he had known him for years, ever since he was a child, and he had never been anything but kind. If neither the Laird nor Lochlan would give her the answers that she wanted, then perhaps her father could.

Dear Faither,

Little Malina has not taken a liking to me yet, but I am doing my best. I am sure that I will win her favor soon. I await your visit with excitement.

I have met the Laird twice now, and he is nothing like the man you described to me before I left home. What do you know about him? Is it possible that you were mistaken? He seems like a completely different man, more like the Beast that everyone calls him than the kind man you described to me.

I hope you can visit soon. I miss you terribly.

With love,

Etna

When Etna finished writing the letter, she folded and sealed it before placing it on the vanity. She would have it delivered first thing in the morning, she thought, and with any luck, she would have some answers to her questions soon.

As Etna settled into bed, she tried to remember all the stories her father had told her about the Laird and his brother. She remembered hearing about two darling boys, who always got in trouble with the head housekeeper but were also bright and kind and generous. She remembered her father telling her about when the Laird had found an injured bird and had nursed it back to health, and about the time he and Lochlan had tried to cook a big meal for their mother—only to ruin the kitchen, much to the maids' chagrin.

The only reason for that change that Etna could think of was his wife's death, but even so, she couldn't imagine how such a change had taken place. It seemed so unlikely, so strange that the mystery of it kept her up at night.

The thoughts of Finley's hands on her also kept her up at night. She remembered that strong touch of his, the way that his arms had encircled her not once but twice, and though both memories were tainted by the fear she had felt, there was an undercurrent of excitement. No man had ever touched her like that before, and her body craved more. She wanted to feel that touch everywhere, without the barrier of clothes between them.

The following morning, she stood from her bed just as there was a knock on the door, and when it opened, Etna saw Mairi.

"The Laird wishes to see ye," she told Etna, and to say that she was surprised would be an understatement. "I'll take ye to his study when ye're ready."

"Do ye ken why he wants to see me?" Etna asked, certain that he would either kick her out of the castle or murder her or something equally terrible.

Mairi shook her head, and Etna considered her options. She could either risk going to the study, or she could risk not going to the study, and she was convinced that she would be putting herself in danger either way.

Besides, even if the Laird had no nefarious plans for her, she still didn't want to see him after their last encounter. She would much rather spend the day with Malina, continuing her routine and staying as far away from the man as possible.

In the end, she decided to go see him since she didn't have much of a choice. The man was the Laird of the clan, and if he wanted to talk to her, then he would find a way to do so.

"Mairi . . . could ye mail this letter for me?" Etna asked, grabbing the letter she had written to her father and handing it to her. "It's for me faither. Do make sure that he receives it."

"Aye, me lady."

"Please, call me Etna," she said as the two of them walked to the west wing. Even in the morning, that part of the castle was almost impossibly dark, and the only thing that helped Etna see was the torch that Mairi grabbed from the wall.

"It's verra dark in here," Etna commented.

"The Laird likes it that way," Mairi said, and if Etna caught some resentment in her tone, she could hardly blame her. "It's always dark in here."

"Doesna it bother ye?" Etna asked. "It's always so . . . so gloomy. How can ye spend yer days here?"

Mairi gave her a small shrug. "We're all used to it."

Etna had noticed that Mairi, much like every other maid, didn't talk much. It was a chore just to get a few words out of her, and even when Etna managed to do so, the answers that she got were vague and unsatisfying.

Before she knew it, they stood in front of the Laird's study, and Mairi knocked on the door. When Etna entered the room, she saw

that it wasn't just the Laird who was there but also Lochlan.

"Etna!" he exclaimed. "Thank ye for joinin' us. Please, take a seat."

Etna did as she was told, perching herself on the edge of an armchair and nervously looking at the two men. "Why did ye call me here?"

"Weel . . . first of all, we are all verra happy that ye're teachin' Malina," Lochlan said. "We think that ye're doin' a good job, and we hope that ye'll continue to tutor her, despite . . . despite the . . . uh . . . events of the previous night."

Etna hummed, intrigued by the fact that the Laird still wanted her there. She also didn't miss that the man didn't talk himself, instead letting Lochlan speak for him. It was strange, but it gave Etna the chance to study him.

Everyone had always said that the Laird was deformed, that his face was unsightly. She had thought that perhaps that was why he kept everything so dark, but now that she could see his face, there was nothing wrong with him. Sure, he had a scar, one that ran from his forehead to his cheek, and was quite noticeable, but that didn't make him any less handsome, and it certainly didn't make him a *beast*.

She couldn't tell if the people were simply exaggerating or if they truly thought of him as hideous. But no, no one could be that awful, she thought. Surely, it was all rumors that had gone too far.

She had to believe that he wasn't the beast that everyone said he was because his gaze, which was pinned on her while Lochlan spoke, pierced her to the core and brought back the memories of his arms around her. He was a stern man; there was no doubt about that and having his gaze on her stressed her to no end, but it also excited her at the same time. She could only imagine how he would look at her if she was undressed, how that intense gaze would devour her whole.

And she averted her gaze, hoping that she could hide the furious blush that reddened her cheeks.

“And we were wonderin’ if ye would consider helpin’ the Laird with his public speeches,” Lochlan continued. “I’m afraid me brother isna the most talkative man—”

The Laird cleared his throat pointedly then, but he remained silent. He only fixed Lochlan with a stern gaze, to which Lochlan replied with a saccharine smile.

“Case in point,” Lochlan said. “And so, we thought that perhaps it would be a good idea if ye helped him connect with his people more. Ye could help him write some speeches, and ye could teach him how to deliver them.”

Etna doubted that the Laird didn’t know how to do that himself. She was certain that her father had prepared him for it, and she had the impression that he simply didn’t want to do it. But that was fine with her; it didn’t matter who her student was or how difficult he would be. She was a tutor, and she was determined to help.

But while she was helping, she would also make sure that she got something out of it.

She remembered her plan before she came to the castle when she had decided that she would gather as much money as she could and then move back to Edinburgh. Now seemed like the perfect time to make that demand, and she wasn’t shy about it.

After all, the Laird had almost cut her throat just hours prior.

“Weel . . . I must think about it, of course,” she said, testing the waters. “Ye see, the payment—”

“—Will be generous,” Lochlan said, finishing her sentence for her. “We will compensate ye accordingly.”

"In that case, I would like yer assistance to move back to Edinburgh," she said. "I will continue to teach Malina, and I will teach the Laird everythin' that I can, and by the end of it, perhaps in a few months, I'll expect a sum big enough to help me move back."

Etna watched as Lochlan and the Laird exchanged a glance. Before Lochlan could say anything, the Laird gave a small nod, one that was almost imperceptible, and Lochlan didn't seem too pleased about it.

"Verra weel," he said. "We have a deal."

Etna's excitement almost bubbled over. She could have screamed, she could have hugged them both, she could have climbed to the rooftop just to shout that she was going back home!

"If ye manage to make me people like me," the Laird added. "Ye'll help me with the speeches, and ye'll make sure that they make them like me again. Otherwise, I dinna see why I'd help ye."

Etna's excitement dissipated as fast as it had appeared. She pinned him with a glare, crossing her arms over her chest, and had to resist the urge to curse her own father for sending her to that man.

How will I make him likable? He's anythin' but!

Etna couldn't lose hope, though. She had two difficult tasks ahead of her: making Malina like her and making the clan people like her father. Impossible as they both seemed, she was determined to succeed.

It wasn't as if she had any choice in the matter, after all. She could hardly spend the rest of her days until Malina grew up in that castle. And if there was anyone who could make the Laird more likable, it was her. Her father always said that she had a way with people.

“When will we start?” Etna asked as she tried to school her expression into one of indifference. She didn’t want either man to know what the news meant to her.

“As soon as possible, I’d say,” Lochlan told her. “Ye have some time before yer lesson with Malina, so I think I’ll leave the two of ye to it.”

As Lochlan spoke, he stood and headed for the door. When Etna was left alone with the Laird, she turned to look at him, any hint of a smile on her lips disappearing.

The man was simply unpalatable.

“Weel . . . I think a good start for ye would be a long bath and a shave,” she said as she regarded him. That beard should be the first thing to go, she thought or at least tamed. He looked like a madman with it, long and scraggly as it was, and by the smell of him, Etna deduced that he hadn’t had a bath in a while.

The Laird’s eyes narrowed at that, and she could see that he had taken offense at her words. “Do ye wish to bathe me and make sure that I’m clean to yer standards?” he asked her.

The Laird’s words immediately made Etna’s heard hammer in her chest. Her cheeks heated, and she crossed her arms, shocked that the man would even suggest such a thing.

And yet, a part of her was thrilled at the suggestion. She felt the heat and desire pool deep in her belly, and her breathing turned shallow, much to her frustration. She shouldn’t let him have such an effect on her, she thought. The man was savage.

“That’s na what I’m here for,” she told him, indignant. “If ye wish to be bathed, then ask a maid. I’m sure one of them will tend to yer needs.”

The Laird seemed to be just as shocked by Etna’s words as she was

by his own. The two of them remained silent, staring at each other, and it seemed to her as though neither of them knew what to say next.

“Weel . . . I will speak to ye again after ye bathe, then,” Etna ended up saying, and after she gave him a court bow, she rushed out of the room. She could hardly believe that he had been so forward and that she had done the same. How was she supposed to face him after that conversation?

Etna began to head back to the main part of the castle for her lesson with Malina with a sigh. She noticed that there were more torches on the walls now, as though they had been lit just for her to find her way back, and she could see with ease.

And then she wished the west wing would have remained dark. As she turned the corner, she caught a glimpse of Lochlan and Mairi kissing—though kissing was hardly what she would call it. With a gasp, she hid behind the corner and listened intently, hoping that they hadn’t spotted her.

By the sound of it, they were too lost in each other to notice anything else.

Etna froze for a moment, not knowing what to do. Then, she crept back to the other side of the corridor and began to stomp onto the floor as she walked, announcing her presence. Halfway to the turn, she began to whistle, too, for good measure, and she thought that there was no way Lochlan and Mairi wouldn’t hear her.

By the time she turned around the corner, Lochlan was gone, and Mairi was dusting some imaginary dirt off an armor that stood by the wall. Neither of them was willing to make eye contact, but when Etna was out of earshot, she couldn’t help but let out a giggle.

Weel . . . good for Lochlan. And good for Mairi, too.

After all, Mairi was a beautiful young woman, and Lochlan was handsome and the Laird's brother. It was a strange match, and Etna

had to admit that she was worried about the two of them. The Laird didn't seem like the kind of man who would approve of such a relationship.

What if he already kens? Does he have a lover, too?

It sounded more likely than Etna wanted to admit. He could even have had a string of lovers for all she knew, maids that satisfied his urges without any attachments. He hadn't had a wife for years, after all, and she doubted that he had stayed celibate, no matter how beastly everyone thought he was.

But what do I care if he has a dozen lovers?

There was one thing that Etna knew for certain: no matter how tempting it sounded, she would never be one of them.

Chapter Seven

Finley looked at himself in the mirror, squinting at his reflection.

Ach, I dinna look as bad as the lass said.

Sure, he thought, his beard was far from well-kept, and he didn't even remember the last time he had had a haircut, but he didn't look as terrible as Etna had implied. Then again, he looked more like a farmer than a Laird and a shabby one at that.

He had to admit that Etna wasn't wrong about the bath being necessary, though. He had just been so preoccupied with the brigands and the attacks that he hadn't paid any attention to anything else. He didn't care what he looked like; he could never be handsome with that scar on his face anyway.

With a sigh, Finley began to shave, gliding the razor gently over his skin. There was a lot of hair to shave off, and it took him a while, careful as he was, to get every last bit of that beard. Once he was done, he moved to his hair, and though he could hardly do an expert job, he began chopping it to shoulder length.

In retrospect, Finley thought that he should have brought the barber to do it for him or ask Lochlan for help, but his own efforts would have to do. When he rinsed his face and looked in the mirror once more, he winced.

He hadn't seen his face like that ever since Anna's death. The man in the reflection was a stranger to him by then, and he didn't know what to think. He had spent so long neglecting himself that the mere sight of his clean-shaven face was disconcerting.

Finley turned away from the mirror and patted his face dry with a towel. It was a good thing, that change, he told himself, even

though now his scar was more visible than ever. At least he looked more civilized, more like a Laird than he had in a while.

And most would think that his scar was a testament to his bravery.

He snorted at that thought, shaking his head. He had been anything but brave that day, and he wanted no reminders of it.

As Finley sank in the tub, he began to think once more about Etna. The woman was a mystery to him, and as much as he tried, he couldn't figure her out. What kind of person had the nerve to speak to a Laird in the way that she had spoken to him? She was hot-headed and rude, and he wondered how such a woman could be Dougal's daughter.

Then he realized that she was most likely thinking the very same things about him, and the thought brought a smile to his lips, one that he quickly bit back. It did no good to develop any attachment to anyone, especially not her.

But the way she had spoken to him and the way that her body had felt against his own invited the same thoughts to his head over and over. Finley desired her, and he could hardly deny it, no matter how much he wished he could. She was the perfect distraction from all his problems, and he could see himself spending several nights with her in his bed.

But that's the issue. I canna have any distractions in me life.

Finley shook his head and wished that the water in the tub was cold so that it could take his mind off Etna. When he hopped out of the water, he dried himself and dressed in fresh clothes, the simple, repetitive motions helping him to empty his mind of any sexual thoughts he had about her.

The last thing he wanted to do was cause a scandal. He was already on bad terms with all his clansmen and women, and rumors of a sexual relationship between the two of them could do more harm than good.

When Finley finished making himself look presentable, he returned to his study. On his way there, he didn't fail to notice that the corridors were brighter, much to his chagrin, as though the maids had taken it upon themselves to light up the way.

I bet it's Etna's doin' . . . she doesna ken when to leave things as they are.

Once in his study, Finley poured himself a cup of wine and waited. He didn't know what else to do with himself, feeling like a young boy who was waiting for his teacher to continue the lesson, and he cursed himself for it.

He shouldn't have to be told how to write his own speeches, he thought. He was perfectly capable of doing it himself. Sure, he was a little rusty after not giving a single speech in five years, but he doubted that anything had changed.

And yet, when he grabbed the pen and the ink, determined to prove that he still had the skills, his mind went blank, and his hand faltered over the paper. Even when he scribbled, he soon found that he hated what he was writing and promptly crossed it off.

What is the matter with me? Why can I na do this?

Perhaps Lochlan had been right, Finley thought, but that made him even more determined to write something. He continued to scribble furiously on the paper, crossing off his sentences and rewriting them, and he was so focused on his task that he didn't even hear the knock on his door.

"Me Laird?" asked a voice, and Finley looked up to see Etna standing by the door, watching him with a curious frown.

When Etna saw Finley, she could hardly believe it was the same man. Clean-shaven and dressed in fresh clothes, he looked the part of a Laird, like someone who belonged in a castle.

And he looked handsome, so handsome that Etna stumbled over her words, forgetting what she wanted to say to him.

“I . . . uh . . . am I interruptin’, me Laird?” she asked, and the words sounded high-pitched and strange even to her own ears.

Finley put the pen down slowly. “Nay,” he said. “Weel . . . I shaved, and I bathed as ye directed. Are we done?”

“We’ve only just begun,” Etna pointed out as she took a seat across from him, glancing at the paper, curious to see what he had been writing. When he saw her, Finley grabbed the paper, balled it up, and tossed it in a drawer, and Etna tried to change the subject quickly. “Ye ken . . . ye look verra nice.”

There was no mistaking the surprise in Etna’s tone. Finley raised an eyebrow at that, and Etna cursed herself quietly for showing her shock at the transformation.

“Did ye think that I would be hideous?” he asked her. “Did ye think I’d look like a *beast*?”

His words took Etna by surprise, and she averted her gaze, not daring to reply to Finley’s question. Her cheeks reddened, a blush that betrayed her embarrassment.

“Ye shouldna believe everythin’ that people say,” Finley told her.

“I . . . I didna . . .”

“I’m sure that ye did. Everyone does.”

“I didna,” Etna said, this time with more certainty and determination. “I willna lie to ye . . . I didna ken what to think when I first came here. Weel . . . I still dinna ken what to think about ye. But I’ll tell ye one thing. It’s na yer scar that makes people call ye a beast. Na one cares about the scar, me Laird, apart from ye.”

It was Finley's turn to be quiet. Etna stared at him, defiant. Everyone in the castle had mollicoddled him for too long, and she wouldn't be doing the same. Finley was a grown man. It was time that he took on some responsibility once again.

For a few moments, the two of them shared an awkward silence, one that neither seemed to know how to break. In the end, Finley poured Etna a cup of wine, offering it to her in place of an olive branch. Etna took the cup and tilted it in a toast before taking a sip and visibly relaxing.

"The real work has yet to begin, me Laird," Etna said then. "If ye wish to connect with yer people, ye must speak to them from the heart. Be the man that they deserve to have for a leader. Show them that ye've changed."

"But I havena changed," Finley pointed out.

"Na yet," Etna said. "But ye will. If ye wish to change, I'm sure that ye can and ye will."

There was a vulnerability in Finley's look that Etna hadn't expected to see, as though he clung to her words. How long had it been since someone had been nice to him, she wondered? Then again, she could hardly blame the clan for being anything but nice since Finley himself was so unpleasant and disagreeable.

She felt for him, though. Her heart sank, knowing that Finley had once been a kind young man who had been through so much that he now dwelled in the dark, surrounded by people who feared him.

Finley drained his cup, and then he stood, fetching the only carafe in the room that still seemed to have some wine in it. Etna stood from her seat as he poured the drink and walked to the window, pulling the thick curtain that covered it back.

"Why do ye always keep the curtains closed?" Etna asked him. "Look at this view . . . it's marvelous."

Finley joined her by the window, looking out into the distance at the hills that surrounded the castle. Beyond them, the sky stretched into a brilliant blue with waves of white, creating a view that looked like a painting.

"I dinna wish to be reminded of joyous things when I canna have any joy meself," Finley said.

"Who says that ye canna have any joy?"

Finley frowned at that, as though the mere thought of being happy was confusing to him.

"Na one has to tell me," he told Etna. "I ken it meself. I do . . . I havena felt joy in a while, and I ken that I never will again. I've made me peace with it."

"Ye're na lettin' yerself feel any joy just because ye think ye canna?" Etna asked. "Have ye tried na tellin' yerself that ye're na capable of joy? That ye're na worthy of it?"

"I dinna ken what would bring me joy," Finley admitted.

Etna gave him a small shrug. "The sun. The waters of the loch. Yer brilliant daughter . . . anythin'. Ye only have to look."

Finley did look. He looked at her, and Etna felt exposed under his intense gaze, bare. When she opened her mouth to speak, Finley leaned closer, putting an end to her train of thought.

And then he kissed her.

He kissed her like she was the very air that he was breathing, greedy and demanding, his lips an insistent press against her own. One arm snaked around her waist, pulling her closer to him, and she responded with a soft moan, her hands coming up to rest on his shoulders.

Etna's desire crashed over her like a wave. She had never experienced anything like that kiss before, and Finley's evident desire for her left her dizzy with want. Before she knew it, her hands were moving on their own accord, fingers curling in the fabric of his shirt, and Finley deepened the kiss, his hands moving to her hips as he pressed her against the wall.

The sound of the door opening had Finley jumping back like he was burned. He was heaving, and so was Etna, and there was no hiding what they had been doing.

When Etna turned to face whoever it was that had come into the room without even knocking, she saw none other than Arlene, and the shame that overtook her made her wish that she could hide behind Finley and never meet Arlene's gaze again.

"Oh . . . dinna let me interrupt ye," Arlene said, waving a hand dismissively. "I only wanted to ask ye if ye're still plannin' to leave the morrow."

Etna exchanged an awkward glance with Finley and tried her best to hide in the shadows of the room. Finley gave his grandmother a smile and then managed to say: "Aye . . . I'll leave first thing in the mornin'."

"Good, good," Arlene said before she gave them both a wave, closing the door behind her as she left.

.

There was a heavy silence between Etna and Finley for what seemed like eons to her. She couldn't think of a single thing to say, nor did she know how to excuse herself. What she did know was that she could never face him again, either, and that the number of people she could look in the eye was dwindling—fast.

"I . . . uh . . . I'd better get ready for the morrow," Finley said, and Etna couldn't be more relieved to have a reason to leave. "I'll be visitin' the villages, and I must be well-rested," he said, even though

it wasn't even midday yet.

“Och, aye,” Etna said, already heading for the door, eager to get out of that room. “Aye . . . good luck with that, me Laird.”

With that, she was gone, but the moment the door closed behind her, she leaned against it, her trembling legs refusing to take her any further.

What have I done? I ruined everythin'.

Chapter Eight

Etna ran out of the castle, her heart pounding in her chest. Her blood rushed through her veins, making her hands shake and her head throb, and she didn't even know where she was going until she found herself outside the castle walls.

Only hours ago, it would have been easier for her to breathe there, unencumbered by the darkness of the castle, but now it was just as hard, and her lungs struggled for oxygen.

What have I done? How could I have been so foolish?

The Laird had all but kicked her out of that room, and she could hardly blame him. What had happened between them wasn't as concerning, though, as the fact that Arlene had seen them. She could never look at her in the eyes again, she thought, and she didn't even know how she could stay in that castle.

If she was allowed to stay, that is. She wouldn't be surprised if the Laird kicked her out.

Though he had seemed much kinder and sweeter to Etna than she had thought. The Beast that everyone spoke of was nothing but a man, a man whose life had dealt him some terrible blows and who was still recovering from them. She was certain that the stress from the brigand attacks that were happening all over his land only made his stress worse, and though she couldn't excuse his behavior, she was at least closer to understanding him.

But what was she supposed to do now that they had kissed? Had she not reciprocated, she wouldn't have been so worried about the future, but she had kissed him just as fervently as he had kissed her. She had not held back. She had not pushed him away.

She had wanted it more than anything at that moment.

A part of her wished that she had never told him to clean up and shave, as she wouldn't have found out just how handsome he was, with his strong jaw and chiseled cheekbones. His features were strong, masculine, straight nose sloping over the pale thin yet beautifully pink lips. Etna could only describe his appearance as noble. He had the kind of face that spoke of his kindness now that it wasn't hidden by the beard, the kind of face that belonged to a man destined to lead. Even his blue eyes seemed to stand out once all that hair was gone, and it was the first time she had noticed their color.

And that scar . . . Etna wished that she could tell him that scar did nothing to change how handsome he was. It was nothing but a story, the remnant of a past that he should remember. Perhaps it had come from an accident, or perhaps it had come from a battle. Either way, she didn't want him to be ashamed of it.

For the rest of the day, Etna avoided both the Laird and Arlene, even skipping dinner so that she wouldn't have to risk running into either of them. Late at night, she snuck into the kitchens, looking for something to eat while everyone else was asleep.

Or so she thought.

"There's cheese, too," said a familiar voice, and Etna turned to see Arlene there, looking like the cat that got the cream.

Etna cursed herself. She should have thought that Arlene would track her down sooner or later, somewhere where the two of them could be alone, but she hadn't thought that she would stay up so late just to ambush her.

"Och, I thought I'd get a bannock, perhaps, or an apple or—"

"I'll make us some tea, I think," Arlene said, and it wasn't a question or an offer but rather a demand. Etna watched her as she rummaged through the kitchen as though she had done it hundreds

of times before. She seemed familiar with where everything was kept, and Etna couldn't help but wonder why since she could just as easily have servants do everything for her.

"I like to drink some tea late at night," Arlene said, as though reading Etna's thoughts. "Alone. It helps me think."

"Ye're na alone noo," Etna pointed out. "But I can head to me chambers, I only came to have some food and—"

"Nonsense," Arlene said, waving a hand. She brought out a heavy teapot and filled it with water before lit a fire and placed it over it. "Ye'll have some tea with me, will ye na? Since we're both awake."

Etna could hardly refuse. She nodded and took a seat at the small table that stood by the window, and she glanced outside, looking at the moon. It was almost full, she noticed, and it cast a pale glow all around her.

While Arlene was making the tea, the two shared a silence that seemed uncomfortable to Etna, though she couldn't guess how the other woman felt. She dreaded the talk that was to follow. Would Arlene tell her to stay away from her grandson? Would she tell her to leave? Perhaps she wouldn't want her anywhere near the Laird or Malina.

Once the tea was ready, Arlene brought two cups over to the table and sat across from Etna, watching her in silence. Etna dropped her gaze to her teacup, pretending to be fascinated by the swirling liquid.

She couldn't meet Arlene's gaze. She couldn't.

"How are the lessons with Malina?" Arlene asked, much to Etna's surprise. Stunned, she finally lifted her gaze to look at the other woman and found her smiling. "I trust that everythin' is going weel?"

“Aye,” Etna said, glad that she had something else than the Laird to talk about with Arlene. “Everythin’ is goin’ verra weel. Malina is a darlin’ wee bairn, and she’s verra clever. I’m sure that she will be excellent at everythin’ that I teach her.”

“That’s nice to hear,” Arlene said. “She’s been alone a lot, poor lassie . . . I dinna have the same strength I used to have one, two, three years ago. The older I get, the harder it is for me to keep up with her.”

“She is rather energetic,” Etna admitted. “I even have trouble keepin’ up with her sometimes.”

“Aye, aye . . . and ye are young. Twenty-and-two?”

“Twenty-and-four,” Etna corrected.

“Twenty-and-four,” Arlene repeated to herself, humming softly as though she had made a discovery that pleased her. “Tell me . . . how’s yer faither?”

The sudden change in subject made Etna frown, but once again, she was glad that Arlene wasn’t asking about what had happened between her and the Laird. She was glad to talk about anything else than that kiss.

“He’s weel,” Etna said. “I sent him a letter; I expect him to reply soon. I can give ye all the news that he tells me then.”

“It would be nice to invite him to the castle,” Arlene said. “Yer faither is a dear friend of our family, and we all long to see him again. In fact, I think that I will send him an invitation.”

“I’m sure he’ll be verra glad to come here and see ye all again,” Etna said. The more the two of them spoke, though, the more nervous she became. She couldn’t understand why Arlene was asking her questions about such things, why she was making small talk instead of talking about what she really wanted to talk about.

Etna didn't believe for a second that the tea and the conversation that they were having had nothing to do with the kiss she had witnessed.

"Ye're an only child, are ya na?" Arlene asked then, continuing her interrogation.

Etna nodded. "Aye. Me parents never had the chance to have another bairn."

"Shame, that," Arlene said with a sigh. "It's a blessin' to have a big family. Do ye want a big family one day?"

It was then that Etna realized what Arlene was doing. She was trying to get to know her better, though she couldn't understand to what end. Could it be that she simply wished to know more about her? Could it be that she had no hidden agenda?

"I do, aye," Etna said. She wanted many children, as she loved them dearly, and they brought her so much joy. She was in no rush to marry, especially since she wanted to go back to Edinburgh. That was her main goal, and everything else would have to wait.

Besides, she had only just started tutoring, and she doubted that she could continue doing that if she had children. Her father was fortunate enough to be a man, and he could travel and stay away from the house even after he had a child. She wouldn't have the same luxury, she knew.

She wanted to enjoy tutoring as much as possible before settling down and had children of her own.

Arlene continued to ask Etna question after question, and Etna answered them all until their tea was cold, and Arlene was satisfied. In the end, Etna noticed that there had been no mention of the Laird the entire time.

"Weel . . ." Arlene said as she stood from her chair slowly as if the

late hour had weighed her down. "I think that it is time I retire to me chambers, my dear. Do get some rest before yer lesson with Malina the morrow, will ye?"

"I will," Etna promised. With that, Arlene left the kitchen, leaving Etna alone to consider everything that they had talked about.

She still couldn't imagine a single reason why Arlene had asked her all those questions, but she did know that she had been sneaky about it. It seemed to her as though there was something that the other woman wasn't telling her, but she couldn't possibly think of what that could be.

Besides, Arlene had been nothing but kind and accommodating to her the entire time she had been at the castle. What did it matter if she was a little odd? She was an old woman, after all. Perhaps all there was to it was that she was lonely so late at night, and she wanted someone to talk to.

Etna decided that it was the only logical solution. After cleaning the table, she headed back to her chambers, now comfortable walking through the dark corridors of the castle. Her bed, like her entire room, was warm and inviting, and she settled under the covers with a soft, content sigh.

The first thought on her mind when her head hit the pillow was the Laird. *Finley*. The kiss that they had shared had awakened something in her, something that she couldn't ignore. The memory replayed itself in her head over and over, and no matter how much she tried to push it away, she couldn't stop thinking about it.

What am I to do? I canna think about him in such a way.

It was inappropriate, and it couldn't lead to anything good, she knew. Surely, the Laird would never want a serious relationship with her, and Etna didn't want anything less than that. She didn't want to be his dirty secret, nor did she want to be discarded when he would find someone more suitable.

She decided that there would never be anything between the two of them. She would keep her distance from him, and she would make sure that she would never be alone with him, not even for a moment. Any relationship they would have would be professional, and by the end of it all, she would have enough money to move back to her beloved Edinburgh. Once there, she would never have to see the Laird again, and she would never have to think about those lips or the feel of his body against her.

Until then, I'll try me best to na kiss him again.

Chapter Nine

Finley paced up and down his study, fist clenched tightly around a cup of wine that he had forgotten he was holding. He had been restless all night, his mind empty apart from the thoughts of Etna that had cemented their presence there.

Kissing her had been a mistake.

At least, he would be leaving the castle soon to visit the villages. That would put plenty of distance between the two of them, and he hoped that by the time he would return, both of them would be able to be around each other without any discomfort.

He was under no illusions that he would forget the kiss, though. No, that was etched in his mind, the memory searing like a branding iron.

He remembered the soft brush of Etna's lips on his own, the soft, almost inaudible sounds that she had made, the eagerness that matched his own. He remembered how warm she felt against him, how perfectly they fit together.

And yet, none of that mattered.

It's nothin' but a silly infatuation. I have more important things to consider.

The knock on the door was a reminder of those things. When Lochlan stepped inside, dressed for their upcoming journey, Finley abandoned his cup on the desk and went to follow him, but before he could get too far, a hand on his chest stopped him.

"Ye look like shite."

Finley shoved Lochlan's hand off him, his already sour mood only worsening at his comment. "Thank ye, Lochlan. Yer comments are verra appreciated, as always."

Lochlan rolled his eyes at Finley in that annoying way that he reserved only for him. "I'm only sayin' . . . ye look like ye havena slept all night."

"I didna."

His confession sounded almost like an admission of guilt, and Finley couldn't help but wince the moment the words were out of his mouth. Lochlan liked to worry, and he liked to worry about him most of all, but Finley didn't want him or anyone else to fret over him. He knew how to take care of himself just fine.

"Anythin' on yer mind?" Lochlan asked, in that indirect way of his, and though Finley knew that he suspected something was wrong, he also knew that there was no way he was aware of what had happened the previous night between him and Etna.

He must think that I worry about havin' to speak to me people.

And a part of him did. He hadn't given a speech in years, and the mere thought that he would soon be giving one was enough to set him on edge and make his palms sweat. He hadn't had much time to consider that, though, since he was so preoccupied with the kiss.

And then it occurred to him that Lochlan perhaps knew precisely what was on his mind. What if Arlene had spoken to him? What if she had told him about it?

Na . . . na, she wouldna. And if Lochlan kent, he would have already asked me a million questions.

"Everythin' is fine, Lochlan," Finley assured him with a weary sigh. "Isna it time that we left?"

“Aye, I suppose it is,” Lochlan said, and after another quick look at Finley, he turned around to leave.

Finley followed him, the two of them walking in silence. Though the group that followed him to the villages was a small one, comprised of only half a dozen men, Lochlan had enlisted their mightiest warriors and Finley couldn’t help but frown at the sight of them all, waiting by the gates.

“Expectin’ trouble?” he asked Lochlan as they joined the rest of them.

Lochlan gave him a small shrug. “Ye never ken,” he said. “With all these attacks that have been takin’ place lately, it’s better to be cautious.”

“What about the castle?” Finley asked. The last thing that he wanted to do was leave the castle defenseless. He would never forgive himself if an attack decimated his clan because he had taken all their best soldiers with him to protect his own life.

“The castle will be fine,” Lochlan assured him. “They willna miss six men.”

“Are ye certain?”

“Finley, I’ve been trainin’ these men every day,” Lochlan said, and it was his turn to let out a heavy sigh, one that showed Finley that he was tired of being questioned. “I am certain they can handle it. Give me some credit.”

With a nod and a pat on Lochlan’s shoulder, Finley let go of their conversation. Lochlan was right; he had never let Finley down, nor any of the other men. Not trusting him with such matters would be foolish since he had been the one to effectively manage all the soldiers ever since Finley had withdrawn himself from all matters.

As they rode out of the castle gates, he hoped that he could get a

quiet ride and, for a while at least, he did. The eight of them moved in silence, and Finley had the chance to relax for the first time ever since the previous night. It seemed that the more physical distance he put between him and Etna, the more he stopped thinking about her. Instead, he was immersed in his surroundings, appreciating the fresh air that filled his lungs and the gentle breeze that caressed his face.

He rarely got out of the castle. The hunt that he and Lochlan had gone to had been the last time that he had ventured out of the west wing and being back outside proved to be a nice change from the drabness and the darkness of the castle. Every time he shut himself inside his study, he forgot how much he enjoyed being outside, away from it all.

But of course, his peace didn't last long. Lochlan seemed hellbent to find out what was wrong with him, and he fell in step next to him, a curious look on his face.

"Are ye certain that ye're weel?" he asked. "If ye're thinkin' about yer speeches—"

"I'm fine, Lochlan," Finley interrupted him. "Really."

"Ye say that as if I dinna ken ye better than anyone," Lochlan said. "I can see that there's somethin' on yer mind."

"Many things are on me mind, as always," Finley said. "It's nothin' new. Dinna fash yerself."

"Is it Etna?"

At that, Finley almost fell off his horse. He held tightly onto the reins, knuckles white and eyes wide open in surprise. "What do ye mean?"

"Ever since grandmaither brought her to the castle, ye've been . . . weel, in a worse mood than usual," Lochlan said. "If ye dislike her

so much, then perhaps it's best that we send her away. I'm sure that we can find a tutor who doesn't make ye so angry."

Finley sighed in relief, glad that Lochlan thought his problem was the opposite of what it actually was. It wasn't that Finley didn't like Etna. Rather, he liked her a little too much.

"As long as Etna does her job, then I dinna see why we should replace her," he said, and he was proud of how steady his voice was when he spoke about her, though he didn't like lying to his own brother. "And it's na her."

"So, there is somethin' that's botherin' ye," Lochlan said.

Finley only had himself to blame for walking right into that, he thought. "I suppose I'm just nervous, Lochlan," he said in the end, thinking that a half-truth would at least get Lochlan to stop questioning him for the remainder of their journey. "I have barely spoken to anyone other than ye or grandmither for a long time."

"Aye, I ken," Lochlan said. "That's why I told Etna to help ye."

Finley had half a mind to force Lochlan to take over. His brother had a way with words, he was cheerful, and he attracted people to him like a lamp attracts moths. He didn't need to be told what to say; he didn't need to write elaborate speeches. It all came naturally to him, and Finley often wondered if it would be better to simply give the Lairdship to him instead.

But he was older, and the burden was his to bear. Besides, as far as he knew, Lochlan had no desire for his position.

"Can we na talk about Etna anymore?" Finley asked then, huffing out in annoyance. He didn't realize just how loud he had been until he noticed that everyone was looking at him, though trying to hide it at the same time.

Lochlan raised his palms up in surrender, letting his horse fall back.

Finley found himself at the front of their formation, and though he wanted nothing more than to sprint to the village, he forced himself to keep a leisurely riding pace.

So much for na thinkin' about her out here.

The novelty of his surroundings had faded by the time that Lochlan had fallen silent, and it had left room for his memories of Etna to return. It didn't take long for him to fantasize about their kiss once more, losing himself in the ghost of the sensations. He even imagined returning from his tour of the villages and finding Etna in her chambers, visiting her late at night when the rest of the castle would be sleeping, taking what he wanted and giving her what she craved.

It was a dangerous train of thought to follow, and Finley shook his head, emptying his mind. He had no reason to expect that Etna would even want another kiss, let alone anything more, after all.

Finley spent the rest of the ride to the first village in agony, and by the end of it all, he didn't know if he preferred the silence or if listening to Lochlan's incessant talking was more soothing now that his mind was besieged by Etna. Unexpectedly, the hubbub of the village was a pleasant change from the quiet and at first, Finley thought that he had been worried for no reason.

Until everyone stopped in their tracks, ceasing their conversations to look at him.

No, not look.

Stare.

That was what Finley had been fearing, the stares, the villagers' shock and fear at seeing him right there, in front of them. He was the Beast, the man that locked himself up in his castle and terrorized his servants. He was the man that found joy in torturing others. Cruel. Heartless. Coldblooded.

He had heard it all, but only in whispers. Seeing it written on the villagers' faces, though, made it all the more real for him. They were all watching him with the same curiosity, the same hostility, the same dread in their eyes, and Finley couldn't stand meeting their gazes.

How will I talk to them if I canna even look at them?

His men seemed to sense his unease, most of all Lochlan. The look that his brother gave him was filled with concern, but just as he was about to speak, Finley shook his head, stopping him.

It willna do any good, discussin' this in front of everyone.

Finley just had to deal with it. He took a deep, steadying breath and plastered a smile on his lips. It was painfully obvious that his smile was fake. He was certain of that, but he hoped that it would make him less threatening, more approachable, and, with any luck, make the villagers listen to him.

All he had to do to gain their trust back was to deliver the speech. Etna had done a good job with it, good enough that even Finley was convinced that it would work.

Talking to the villagers turned out to be no easy feat, though. They were resistant, asking question after question, more than Finley could answer, and complaining to him about everything he had neglected in the past few years.

“Our crops are dyin’.”

“The rent is too high! How are we to live like this?”

“What will ye do for the brigands?”

“Quiet!” Finley snapped, immediately regretting it. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and when he looked up, he saw that everyone was looking at him with the same, horrified expression. He had

been mistaken to think that the villagers wouldn't listen to him. Both he and Lochlan had a way to make people listen. It was just that in his case, he did so by instilling fear.

"I ken that some things have been neglected in the past few years," Finley continued. "I understand that. Ye can rotate the crops, and I suppose we can discuss the rent, but I'll tell ye this when it comes to the brigands. We have been tryin' to fight them with all our strength. And aye, it may na be enough. It may seem like a losin' battle. But we'll never stop tryin' to protect the villages. We'll come up with a plan. We'll do anythin' it takes to stop them."

There was a murmuring around Finley as the villagers whispered to each other, their words not quite reaching his ears. He could understand anger and hostility, but he could read them clearly, but he couldn't read the expression on the villagers' faces now. When he glanced at Lochlan, though, he saw his encouraging nod and the smile that spoke about a job well done.

One village down.

But there were still many to go. He still had to convince hundreds of people that he was not the kind of man they thought he was and that he was worthy of leading them. Perhaps it was a good start, but the road ahead of them was long, and there was no telling if his campaign would be successful in the end.

Finley was determined to try. It would be a shame to have such a good start, only to lead himself to failure.

Chapter Ten

True to his word, Finley had left first thing that morning, before Erna could even get out of bed. It was better that way, though, for everyone involved. She couldn't imagine the embarrassment that she would feel once she would see him again.

But that was inevitable. Finley would eventually return, and she would have to keep her side of the deal by helping him with his speeches. She dreaded spending time alone with him, but what other choice did she have?

She could only hope that Finley felt as uncomfortable about their kiss as she did and that he would have someone acting as a buffer between them in every meeting that they would have. Lochlan always seemed to be around, after all. Who was to say that he wouldn't be there when she and Finley would discuss clan matters?

But for all her embarrassment and her hopes that they would never be left alone again, Etna was constantly bombarded by memories of their kiss. It haunted her waking moments and even her nights. She dreamt of Finley every night, her traitorous mind providing her with images of him kissing her again, gentle and loving, making her crave him even more.

Her own mind had become a mystery to her. Her attraction to Finley demanded to be acknowledged, their kiss the catalyst that had started it all. There was something between them, a spark that she had never had with anyone else, a desire so strong that it was almost unbearable.

How long will he be gone? What will I do when I see him again?

At least, his departure meant that she could focus on Malina, who showed no signs of warming up to her. Etna had tried everything.

She had tried approaching her with kindness, asking her questions about herself and doing things that she enjoyed. She had tried teaching with an iron fist, using firm discipline. She had tried leaving Malina to her own devices, and that seemed to be what the girl preferred, but it didn't give Etna the results that she wanted.

Besides, what kind of tutor would she be if she didn't actually teach?

With heavy steps, she made her way to the library, where Malina was bound to be. After her move to the castle, she had quickly found out that it was Malina's favorite place and that she spent most of her time there. Perhaps it was because the library was the brightest room in the castle or because of the books that lined the walls, all the other worlds that Malina could visit simply by opening their covers. Either way, she was always there, and Etna soon found her curled up in her usual spot, in that large armchair that she had dragged all the way to the window.

Only she had no book in her hands, unlike every other time she had seen her. She had a little doll, one that Etna had seen many times before. She recognized it as her favorite one, a doll that she often carried around with her.

And now it was in pieces. Half of its head was hanging off, and its right arm had been cut clean off. Malina was holding the pieces in her hands, big, bulbous tears running down her cheeks.

"What happened to the doll, Malina?" Etna asked as she crouched down next to her, placing a hand on her shoulder.

As always, Malina stayed silent, and Etna doubted that she would get an answer from him. Of course, the most likely culprit seemed to be one of the dogs that they kept at the palace, and one of the maids would be able to confirm that. But the culprit wasn't as important as the fact that Malina's doll was ruined.

Then again . . . is it?

“Malina, I have an idea,” Etna said, jumping to her feet. “Ye and yer doll stay here. I’ll be right back.”

With that, she scoured the corridors for a maid, and once she found one, she asked her for some sewing supplies. Surely, it wouldn’t be too difficult to reattach the doll’s head and arm. She patched up her own dresses all the time, and the doll was nothing but fabric and stuffing.

Armed with a needle and a thread, Etna made her way back to the library, where Malina had obediently stayed. It seemed to her as though she hadn’t moved at all, though the tears had ceased to fall from her eyes. It seemed like she had no more tears left, and she looked exhausted, even though it couldn’t have been too long since she had woken up.

“Everythin’ will be alright,” Etna said as she tried to pry the doll from Malina’s surprisingly strong grip. She didn’t want to let go, perhaps because she still didn’t trust her, she thought. “I’ll fix yer doll right up, Malina. I promise.”

Malina gave Etna a hopeful look and, after a moment of hesitation, she let her have the doll. Etna began to sew it slowly, carefully, ensuring that all the stuffing was in its proper place and that the pieces of fabric aligned correctly, just like they had before the doll was torn apart. Once she was done, there was no sign that it had been mauled.

“Here,” Etna said, handing the doll back to Malina, who looked at her with an expression of awe on her face. “She’s all healed up.”

Malina hesitated again, looking at Etna with wide eyes and drying her tears with her sleeve, something that Etna thought she would have to put a stop to. Then, before Etna knew it, Malina threw herself in her arms, one hand clutching onto the doll with a death grip.

“Thank ye,” Malina said.

It was only two words, but it was more than Malina had said in a few days, and Etna was happy about that. What made her even happier, though, was that Malina seemed to have completely forgotten whatever grudge it was that she had been holding against her ever since they met. Now she was smiling—no, *beaming*—at her, and her free hand came to wrap around her own.

Etna could hardly believe the change in her, but she didn't want to say or do anything that could ruin the progress that she had made, and so she decided that for a few days, at least, she would have to be cautious when it came to their interactions. If it proved that Malina had warmed up to her for good, though, then Etna would finally be able to relax.

She had been on edge for days, thinking that the Laird or Arlene would kick her out of the castle for not making any progress with Malina and that she would never get to make enough money to move to Edinburgh. But now, progress had been made, and Etna was determined to do her best with the little girl.

She spent the rest of the morning teaching her geography, showing her maps and telling her the names of other countries. By noon, she had switched to French, and once they were done, Malina seemed exhausted. Etna could hardly blame her, especially after the doll incident that morning.

"I think it's time for ye to sleep for a while," Etna said as Malina yawned wide. "Come, let's go."

It was the first time that Malina willingly went for a nap, taking Etna's hand and letting her lead her to her room. Usually, Etna had to fight her for it, as Malina refused to do as she was told, but not this time. Etna didn't know if the lack of resistance came from her exhaustion or from the fact that she seemed to have changed her mind about her, but she suspected it was a bit of both.

"Nanna says ye'll help *Dadaidh* with the clan," Malina said, just as Etna tucked her into bed. Etna perched herself on the edge of the mattress, looking at her curiously.

“Aye, I suppose that’s right,” she said. It was the first time that Malina had spoken to her about the Laird, and she had done so unprompted. It sparked a hope within her that perhaps Malina would want to talk about her father more often, but as she was still testing the waters, Etna didn’t push.

“I think they’ll like him,” Malina said. “The people. I think they ought to like him.”

With that, Malina turned around and closed her eyes, leaving Etna with her mouth open.

Where did that come from?

If there was one thing that Etna knew for certain, children were more perceptive than people gave them credit for. Malina, especially, was bright and observant, and Etna doubted that much slipped past her.

Even though she had never seen the Laird around Malina in all the time that she had been there, she could only assume that the Laird visited his daughter every now and then, at least, if Malina spoke about him like that.

What else can I learn from her? What else will she tell me?

Etna didn’t dwell on it for too long, thinking that it was something for another time. Instead, she left the room, closing the door gently behind her, but jumped when she turned around and ran straight into Mairi.

“Ach, Mairi, ye scared me!” she said, giving her a relieved smile once she realized that she wasn’t a brigand or a thief or any sort of intruder. “What are ye doin’ here?”

“I just wanted to ask if ye were hungry, me lady,” Mairi said, though there was something odd about her, something that Mairi couldn’t quite pinpoint. Some sort of breathlessness and a flush on

her cheeks. For a moment, Etna's mind went to Lochlan, but then she remembered that he wasn't there, that he had left with Finley that very morning.

Perhaps I spooked her as much as she spooked me!

"Ye ken, Mairi, if this place was just a wee brighter, perhaps we wouldna be walkin' into each other," Etna said with a sigh. "But thank ye. I'm verra hungry."

"I suppose the rest of us have already learned to walk in the dark," Mairi said. "It's been a while since the Laird covered up the windows."

At the mention of Finley, Etna was assaulted once again by the memory of their kiss. She could feel her cheeks reddening, heat coursing through her body and settling over her cheeks, and for a moment, she was glad about the darkness that helped conceal her blush. She couldn't understand how merely bringing up Finley had such a profound effect on her, nor did she like it. She wanted to think that she was the master of her own emotions, of her own reactions. Her body, though, seemed to have a different idea.

"Ach, to hell with it," Mairi said then, much to Etna's surprise, as she walked to the window and pulled back the heavy fabric that covered it. It was late in the afternoon by then, but the sun still shone through the smattering of clouds, and the rays bathed that small part of the corridor in brilliant light. The darkness around it only served to make it seem even brighter, almost as bright as the smile on Mairi's face when the warmth of the sun settled over her.

Etna couldn't help but smile with her, Mairi's enthusiasm for such a small thing infectious. Out of the window, she could see that the courtyard was busier than usual, livelier even, with the clansmen and women talking animatedly. It was such a change from what Etna was used to that she could hardly recognize the place as the one where she had spent so many weeks.

"Things change when the Laird isna here," Mairi said, as though

reading Etna's mind.

Ye should be out there, Mairi," Etna said. "Ye're always in the castle."

"Dinna fash yerself about me, me lady," Mairi said, waving a hand dismissively. "Noo . . . yer tea?"

After having the tea that Mairi put together for her, Etna decided to work on Finley's speeches, knowing that he would certainly want to go through some options once he would return. He and Lochlan had made it clear that he would need many of them as he would tour the villages, speeches that would rouse the spirit and make him as likable as possible.

She worked well into the night, pouring herself into it and writing three different speeches for the Laird, and only then did she allow herself to retire to her chambers for the night. Once she was free of responsibilities, though, she began to wonder when Finley would be back.

In the darkness of the night, it seemed like having him back in the castle would be a relief. Etna wanted to see him again; she wanted to talk to him again, even though she didn't know what she could possibly say to him. As awkward as their reunion would be, she couldn't help but wish that he would return soon.

And it wasn't just talking to him that she wanted. She could still feel the phantom touch of his lips on her own, and she could think of nothing that she wanted more than for him to kiss her again.

Ach, what am I thinkin'? I must have gone insane.

It was the only logical explanation for her sudden eagerness to see him again. Every time she closed her eyes, he was right there, looking at her in the same way that he had done when they were alone, with that same heat in his gaze. Etna wanted to feel that heat again, even though she promised herself that she wouldn't get any closer to the man.

But a lass can dream, can she na? I willna get any closer to him. I will only . . . I will only dream of it.

It sounded pathetic, even to her. She didn't want to be the kind of woman who had some sort of silly infatuation with the man for whom she worked. She had heard the story many times, though most of the time it was a maid who was in love with a Laird, not a tutor. For someone like her, it was even more unbecoming. She couldn't afford to show such affections, even if the mere thought of Finley tied her stomach in a knot and made her crave his touch.

Get it together. There's na place for this in me life, na if I want to go back home.

Chapter Eleven

When Etna found Malina the following day, a part of her feared that she would have forgotten all about their truce after she had fixed her doll and that she would have returned to her old self, the one that refused to speak to her and wanted nothing to do with her.

But when Malina saw her enter the library, she ran to her with excitement that Etna hadn't seen her the entire time she had been there. She wrapped her arms around her legs, giving her a tight hug, and Etna couldn't help but smile at her.

"Weel, Malina . . . it's a verra bonnie day outside," Etna said as she looked out of the window. It had been a while since she had last seen a sun so bright, and the day was warm, inviting her to spend all her time outside. It would be a shame to stay in the castle when they could have their lesson put in nature. "How about we go for a walk?"

Malina was eager to agree, nodding fervently, and Etna knew that she would never miss an opportunity to go outside. She had been cooped up in the castle for too long before Etna had come there, and now she wanted to make up for it.

Taking Malina's hand, she led him out of the castle, into the courtyard, and then out of the walls. Like every time that she stepped foot out of there, Etna could suddenly breathe easier, the sunny sky making her forget about the gloominess of the castle.

When the Laird returns, I'll have a talk with him. This is ridiculous! We canna be in the dark every day!

But would Finley even listen? Just because he had changed his appearance, it didn't mean that his personality had changed, as well. No, Etna was certain that would take a much longer time.

Once they made it to the lake, Etna sat down on a large rock, and Malina settled down next to her. She watched the little girl as she plunged her hand in the water, laughing delightedly, her beloved doll nestled safely in her lap.

Ach, that doll. I suppose I have her to thank for this.

The doll made her think back to her own childhood when her mother would make dolls for her. She had died too young when Etna still needed her, and the wound her death had left behind had never quite healed. Whenever Etna thought about her, she was overwhelmed by grief, like a weight in her chest that refused to budge. Having Malina next to her, though, was a comfort. Young children always were for Etna.

Thinking about her childhood while sitting next to the lake reminded her of something her mother used to tell her, a story that she had half-forgotten throughout the years. It was about that very lake, and Etna frowned, trying to remember what it was that her mother had told her about it.

“Malina, do ye want to hear a story?”

“A story?”

Malina looked curious, a small frown on her face, as though the concept of the story was completely foreign to her. Etna answered with a frown of her own.

“Aye,” she said. “A story about this loch.”

Malina nodded, resting her head on her hands as she gave Etna her full attention. Etna reached over, tucking a stray strand of hair behind Malina’s ear as she began to speak.

“In this loch, every night when the moon shines bright in the sky, the fairies come out to bathe,” she said, dipping her hand in the water. “They’re wee creatures, verra tiny, and they fly around on

their wings that look like glass.”

Malina’s eyes were wide open by then, and she was looking at the lake in awe. Etna smiled at her innocence and at her apparent love for stories, and she wondered if anyone had actually taken the time to tell her a story before. Surely, Arlene would have told her a bedtime story or two while taking care of her.

“And they look like wee fireflies under the moonlight, their wings catching the light,” she continued. “They sparkle so brightly, but ye can hardly see it because the water sparkles, too, and they look like one. But if ye’re lucky to spot one, then she’ll be kind enough to talk to ye.”

Malina gasped, her gaze fixed on the surface of the lake. A part of Etna wondered if she had made a mistake telling her that story, thinking that she would pester her every single night from then on to take her to the lake, and then she remembered that she had done just that to her mother. Only they had been far enough from the lake for her to have an excuse to not take Etna as a child. What excuse would Etna have since the castle was right next to it?

“But na human should disturb the fairies,” she said, in a hasty attempt to ensure that the fairies wouldn’t be the only thing Malina would talk about for the foreseeable future. She leaned closer to Malina then, voice turning into a soft whisper as she spoke. “For we are na supposed to ken that they exist.”

Malina nodded slowly, her gaze never straying from the water. “Have ye seen the fairies?”

Etna shook her head. “Na, I havena,” she said, and then she remembered how her mother always told her that she had, in fact, seen them herself when she had been a child. Etna smiled at the memory, shaking her head. “But me maither saw them when she was yer age. And she’s the one who told me that story. And do ye ken what else she told me?”

Malina shook her head.

“She told me that if ye see them, and ye’re pure of heart, they’ll make one wish come true for ye.”

Another gasp from Malina, and Etna smiled, almost believing it all herself. She hadn’t thought about her mother in a while, and remembering her was nice, even though it pained her.

“Where is yer maither noo?” Malina asked, her question taking Etna by surprise. She had to swallow the knot in her throat, the one that threatened to turn into a sob, even though the memories of her mother were faded, distant. Perhaps it was that which saddened her so terribly, the knowledge that she couldn’t remember her mother’s voice or her laugh. She could remember her face, but she was certain that she had some details wrong.

“Me maither is in the same place as yers,” she told Malina with a gentle smile. “And I’m sure that both of them are lookin’ over us.”

For a few moments, there was a tense silence between them. Etna didn’t want to push Malina to talk about her mother, but she had heard nothing about the woman in all the weeks that she had spent there.

How can na one talk about her? Does na one think it’s important to remember her?

Etna hadn’t even heard her name. She hadn’t seen a single portrait of her, though she doubted that one had never been painted. All she could assume was that the Laird had taken them all down, perhaps even destroyed them, removing every reminder of her from the castle.

“*Dadaidh* doesna allow any stories or jokes or songs in the castle,” Malina said then, her voice a conspiratorial whisper, as though she felt like she wasn’t supposed to share that information with Etna. “So, I didna ken any other stories before this one.”

Etna frowned at that. “Why doesna he allow all that?”

Malina gave her a small shrug. "I dinna ken," she said. "He doesna want any noise in the castle. He doesna want people to speak or laugh."

Etna couldn't stop the wave of fury that crashed over her, a rage that she hadn't felt before. How could one man be allowed to ban any hint of joy that all those people could have? No stories, no jokes, no singing, nothing that could entertain them and give them a moment of reprieve from their daily duties. And all that because he was a bitter man.

There were limits, though, even to what a Laird could do. His people were suffering under his rule; Etna herself was suffering, locked up within those walls in the darkness, having to be around people that didn't dare smile, let alone speak to each other. It was getting to her, but unlike everyone else, who seemed to follow Finley's orders without even questioning him, she wasn't afraid of the man.

No matter how awkward seeing him again would be, she was determined to give him a piece of her mind once he would return from the tour. If he wanted his people to like him, to trust him and fight for him, he had to treat them with the same respect that he demanded from them.

"That brute! How can he behave so cruelly?" Etna exclaimed, the words tumbling out of her mouth before she could stop them. When she realized that Malina was there, though, she gasped, a hand coming up to cover her mouth.

As much as she hated what the Laird was doing to his people, she didn't want to speak ill of him in front of his own daughter.

But Malina seemed unperturbed, as though she had heard the very same words many times before.

"It's alright," she said, and Etna looked at her, eyes narrow. It was only then that she realized her expression must have been murderous. She could feel the heat on her cheeks, the pain in her

jaw as she ground her teeth, and she had to will herself to calm down. It could only do harm, letting her rage get the better of her in front of Malina.

“Malina, ye’re only a wee bairn, ye—”

“It’s alright,” Malina said, this time a little more forcefully, sensing Etna’s frustration. “I ken that he’s sad for *Mamaidh*. I understand. I dinna want to make him even more upset by singin’ or dancin’ or smilin’.”

As much as Malina’s words were sweet, so incredibly sweet, Etna’s heart sank for her. She seemed to love her father, despite everything that the man had done, and she was willing to give up every joy she could have if it meant that he wouldn’t be reminded of her mother.

But that couldn’t be the solution to the situation. It wasn’t a solution at all, in Etna’s eyes. The Laird couldn’t ban joy just because he couldn’t feel any of it himself.

And how can he na feel any joy? How can he na feel happy when he looks at Malina?

Even if she looked like her mother, something that Etna couldn’t confirm, she was such a kind, sweet girl that everyone who knew her was bound to love her. How could the Laird not love her enough to give her the childhood that she needed?

“Malina, a wee lassie like ye should grow up with songs and dances and stories,” Etna said, trying once more to get through to her. “A wee lassie should have her *Dadaidh* by her side. Dinna ye miss him?”

“*Dadaidh* visits me sometimes,” Malina said with a small shrug. “I miss him, but he comes to see me at night when everyone else is asleep. When he thinks I’m asleep. Sometimes I hear him cry, but he says that he loves me every time. I asked him why he was cryin’ one time, but he left, and didna come back for days, so I pretend to be

asleep noo when he comes.”

That took Etna aback, and she fell silent for a few moments, her mouth hanging open. She would have never guessed that the Laird paid nightly visits to Malina, but she couldn't understand the secrecy of it all. Why couldn't he simply see her during the day? And how could his grief be so overpowering that he cried next to her bed?

Could it be that he's still grieving? That much?

But no, it couldn't be. She could have believed it had the Laird not kissed her only two days prior. If he was still grieving for his wife every waking moment of his life, then surely, he wouldn't have kissed her.

The Laird's behavior was confusing, sending Etna into a downward spiral right in front of Malina. She had to reel in her thoughts, compose herself, and make sure that Malina's opinion of her father didn't change because of her attitude toward the man. It was good that Malina loved him and that she hadn't given up on him quite yet. It was something that Etna could use to talk some sense into the Laird, to show him that everything he was doing was wrong.

And yet, as wrong as Etna deemed his actions, she couldn't hate him, not truly, not in the way that she wished she could. Finley had captured a part of her heart, and she knew it in her gut that he was a good man. She only wished that he wouldn't let his pain turn him into the hermit that he had become.

“I ken that people dinna like *Dadaidh*,” Malina said then, as she stood and kicked a patch of grass. “I've heard them talk, and I always ken when they talk about him. But ye like him, right? Ye can see that he's nice.”

Etna didn't know what to respond to that. Her feelings for the Laird were complicated at best, and it seemed like every time she heard something new about him, her feelings changed. One moment, she could be frustrated with how unfair and unreasonable the man was,

and the next, she could be moved by his gentleness and generosity.

“Aye,” she said in the end, a soft sigh escaping her lips. “I can see it.” Then, she quickly changed her subject, standing up and offering her hand to Malina. “We should head back to the castle. Come on.”

With that, they began to walk back, Malina falling into step next to her. For the entire walk back, Etna stayed silent, and Malina didn’t try to talk to her. They had spent many walks like that, but something told Etna that Malina wasn’t silent because she refused to talk, but rather because she could sense that Etna didn’t know what to say.

She was a perceptive girl, and not just when it came to her father.

“Etna?” Malina asked, just as they walked through the gates.

“Aye?”

“Will ye tell me more stories?”

At that, Etna stopped walking and crouched down next to her, smiling. “Of course, I will,” she promised. “I’ll tell ye a story every night. Would ye like that?”

Malina nodded. Etna made her a silent promise that she would tell her every story she knew. She would give her all the joy that she had been deprived of.

Etna spent the rest of the day with Malina, teaching and reading to her, and by the time the sun had set, she had kept herself occupied enough to have had no thoughts about the Laird. But as always, those thoughts returned, and she became restless, wishing that he would return already so that she could speak with him.

But she knew that he and his party wouldn’t be returning any time soon. There were several villages for them to visit, and it would take a week, if not more, for them to head back to the castle.

I must stop thinkin' about it, or I'll go insane. All I can do is wait.

Chapter Twelve

Though his speeches at all the villages they had visited had gone unexpectedly well, Finley wasn't anywhere near done, and he knew that well. The last village, the closest to the castle, was also the biggest one, and Finley knew that he had his work cut out for him. The people there were wary of him and his promises, and he was fully prepared to be met with a lot of resistance.

But at that moment, he allowed himself to feel optimistic for the first time in years. The villagers had not only spoken to him after his speech, but some of them even had nice things to say about what he had promised them. Some even seemed surprised by how human he looked, how not-*beastly*.

As he and his men settled there for the night, he didn't even try to stop them from chatting excitedly about what they had seen. They seemed to share his optimism, and he could only hope that he wouldn't end up disappointing them.

Etna's speech has done its work. I willna disappoint them because na one can resist the pull of her words.

Finley had to admit that it had been a clever move on Lochlan's part, convincing him to have Etna writing his speeches. No matter how many speeches he could write himself, none of them would compare to hers.

But what Finley liked most about Etna's speech was that she hadn't tried to sugar-coat the situation with the brigands. She hadn't tried to make him seem like he could do no wrong, nor had she tried to convince the villagers that their assumptions were incorrect. She had simply given them the facts, and she had written them in such a way that no one could do anything but listen.

And Finley knew that once he had their attention, he also had their respect.

After spending the entire day talking to the villagers, he looked forward to getting some rest, even though it was still early. His eyes were heavy, and so were his limbs, weighed down by exhaustion and the desire to sleep.

The moment he closed his eyes, his mind conjured an image of Etna, beautiful, ethereal as she always was. He remembered the softness of her skin, the warmth of her body against his own, and his hands ached to touch her again.

It had been a long time since his body had reacted to a woman in such a way, but the mere thought of Etna aroused him, and a part of him wished that he were back at the castle, with her in his bed. He wanted to make her his, to claim her.

And then, just as he was about to fall asleep to the thoughts of Etna, he heard the unmistakable sound of screams.

Rushing to the window along with the rest of his men, Finley looked down and saw a dozen or so men rushing in on horses, their swords already drawn. In the darkness, he could only see them under the light of their torches, the torches that they used to set fire to the piles of hay, the wood, the houses.

“Ambush!” Finley shouted as his men rushed to grab their swords. “Dinna let them do more harm!”

His men immediately fell into formation, following his command and surrounding him. Finley led them out of the building and straight to the brigands, his war cry their only warning. He refused to let his men do all the fighting, even though it had been a while since he had last used a sword.

Finley counted fifteen brigands. Twelve to their eight. Their odds weren't that bad, not considering that his men were not just a group of thugs but rather well-trained soldiers.

Na. Na eight.

“Where’s Lochlan?” he shouted, but there was no answer from any of his men.

The fight erupted around him in seconds, the air filling with the sounds of iron against iron as the swords clanged and collided. He saw one of them fighting two men at the same time, and just as he tried to run to him, to help him in any way he could, one of the brigands stopped him dead in his tracks, blocking his way.

Finley gripped his sword tightly, knuckles going white around the hilt. He waited for the brigand to attack, and, once he did, he parried his blow easily, taking a step back before they began to circle each other.

Hmm . . . seems like I can still do this.

He had feared that he would have been a little too rusty, and that would end up making him more of a burden to his men than an asset, but the brigands didn’t seem to be very skilled fighters. Finley considered himself much better, even after having abandoned the practice for years.

He let the brigand attack first once more. He had learned the art of patience as a young boy when he first learned how to fight, after months of being stubborn and attacking his trainer first, which only led to him failing. Now, he waited patiently, watching the brigand with a careful gaze, his eyes never straying from him.

When the other man lunged at him once more, Finley parried the blow, spinning his blade and kicking the brigand in the stomach. The man doubled over, coughing and stumbling backward, but Finley didn’t give him time to retreat. He pierced his chest with his sword, driving the blade deep into his torso with a cry, and heard the clatter of the man’s sword as it fell on the ground.

The brigand was dead, his beady eyes devoid of life. Finley pulled his sword out and let it drop to the ground before turning to look

for another to fight.

But he had no time to fight another man, not before two of the brigands used their torches to light a house on fire each. Finley watched for a moment in horror as the flames rapidly engulfed the wooden structures, his heart beating fast in his chest at the thought that there were still people inside them.

I must save them.

Finley rushed into one of the houses with a deep breath, the sweltering heat inside drenching him in sweat almost instantly. The smoke was thick, but Finley pushed his way past the flames to find a woman and a child cowering in the corner while a man was trying—and failing—to put out the fire.

“Come! This way!” Finley shouted at them, grabbing the child and leading them all outside through the back. It took them only moments to escape, but even in that little time, the smoke was thick in Finley’s lungs. He coughed as he ran to the second house, frantically searching for people, but before he could step inside, a man grabbed his arm.

“We’re all out!” he shouted. “We’re fine!”

Relief washed over Finley, and he took a moment to breathe. Once that moment was gone, though, he began shouting commands at the villagers.

“Grab all the water ye can find!” he said as he snatched the nearest bucket. “Put out the fire!”

Around him, there was chaos. People were screaming, running for their lives, trying to save themselves and their loved ones from the brigands. The ones who were brave enough helped Finley with his mission, filling bucket after bucket with water and throwing it at the houses.

The fire blazed in front of Finley, scorching his skin. The heat was almost unbearable, and so was the smoke, his lungs burning with it. But before long, he and the villagers had managed to tame the flames, leaving only embers, and Finley dared to look around him to assess the damage.

His men were all still standing, but so was the majority of the brigands. As rough and unskilled as they were compared to his soldiers, they fought dirty, without any honor. When Finley saw that the soldier was still struggling with his two opponents, he jumped in the middle of the fight, blocking the way to him for one of them.

It didn't seem to matter to the brigand. The man looked crazed, his eyes as wide as that grin on his face, and Finley could hardly believe that there was a man like that out there, a man who took joy in killing others. But joy wasn't his only motive for the attack. Finley was certain that they were the same brigands—or at least part of their group—that had been terrorizing the villages for months.

Finley threw himself at the brigand with a swing of his sword, but the other man's attacks were erratic, just as wild as he was. Finley could do little other than block the brigand's sword with his own and rush to the side to avoid being struck by the blade. He hopped to the left, the sword barely missing his neck when he moved, and immediately pirouetted around to deflect the blow that followed.

He was getting tired, and so were his men, but he could see that the fight was taking a lot out of the brigands, too. His shirt was covered in sweat and in the blood of the man that he had killed, sticking to him like a second skin. He could feel beads of sweat on his temples, between his shoulder blades, and his breath came out in labored huffs, lungs burning every time he drew air into them.

If he was going to make it out of that fight unscathed, he vowed to himself to be sure to train more.

The cries of the men and the grunts of those injured in the fight

were a distant noise in his ears. He was focused on one thing and one thing only: getting out of there alive. He didn't even know how many of his men and how many of the brigands were dead, how many were still standing and fighting. He didn't dare take his eyes off his opponent, not when it seemed like his desire to kill him had overpowered everything else.

Finley attacked the brigand once more with a roar, initiating the attack and hoping that he would catch him by surprise. He was determined to put an end to it, to finish the man and then help with whoever was left, to head back to the castle with as few casualties as possible.

The brigand avoided his blow, but Finley attacked, again and again, making him backtrack and lose his footing. Once he had him cornered by the trunk of a tree, he dealt the final blow, piercing him straight through his gut.

But his relief was short-lived. As he removed his sword from the brigand's body and turned around, another one of those men attacked him from behind. Had Finley not moved the moment that he did, the brigand would have surely killed him, but as it were, the blade cut his flesh right under his ribs, making him cry out in pain.

The force of it was blinding, leaving him breathless for a moment. He looked at his torso, seeing that the blood from his side was quickly seeping into his shirt, painting it a dark crimson, and he immediately knew that the cut was deep, too deep for him to continue fighting.

When he looked at the brigand's face, he found that he was just as surprised as he was, though perhaps because his plan had failed.

Or did it? If I dinna get back to the castle soon, I'll be dead by the end of the day.

Even if he did get back to the castle, back to the healer of the clan, there was no telling if he would make it. Finley felt the sting of the cut every time he moved, every time he breathed, and with each

sting came another rush of blood.

It took all of Finley's strength to raise his sword and defend himself once he saw the brigand swing his own blade to finish him. But the man didn't have the time, not before Lochlan ran to them, tackling the other man onto the ground and shoving his sword straight through his chest.

When Finley looked around him, he saw that most of the brigands were dead while a few had escaped. Though all of his men were still alive, almost all of them, save for Lochlan and one more man, were injured.

Most were even injured more than him, bleeding out on the ground.

"Finley!" Lochlan shouted, his sword forgotten, lodged in the brigand's chest. He rushed to him, both hands pressing tightly on his wound to try to stop the bleeding, his gaze darting back and forth between the cut and his face. Finley waved a weak hand at him, though he suspected that it wasn't as reassuring as he wanted it to be. "Dinna move. Quickly, cloth!"

At his command, a cloth appeared almost instantaneously next to him, and in his stupor, Finley wondered how his brother had managed to train them all so well. What was it that made them bend to his every command? What was it that made everyone listen to him?

Where did he come from?

When Finley looked at his hands, he found them pale, a ghostly white that betrayed his blood loss. He reached for Lochlan, grabbing his shoulder as the other worked on his wound, wrapping the cloth tightly around him, and a part of him wished that he would just stop.

"Lochlan," he said forcefully, trying to get his attention. "Stop. Listen. If it comes to it, I want you to step up and be the Laird."

“Shut up, Finley.”

“*Listen*,” Finley said, shaking his shoulder. “I ken that ye always say ye dinna want it, but ye must. The people listen to ye. They trust ye. There’s na anyone else who can do it. Promise me ye’ll do as I say. And please, take care of Malina for me. Never let her find out what I’ve done.”

“I said *shut up*, Finley,” Lochlan growled, and under any other circumstances, he would have taken offense at his words, but Lochlan’s hands were trembling, and he was working on his bandages with more concentration than he had ever seen him do anything else. “Dinna speak. Dinna say anythin’ . . . just . . . let me just do this, and we’ll get ye on the horse.”

Finley did as he was told. He had little strength left, and spending it on arguing with Lochlan seemed like a bad choice. He had to trust that his brother would know what the right thing for the clan was and that he would take his place once he passed.

Something that seemed more and more likely with every passing moment. He was feeling the effects of the blood loss and the shock, dizziness and nausea and that combination of heat and cold that left him both sweating and shaking.

At least he knew that Malina was loved. No matter what happened to him, Lochlan and their grandmother would take good care of her.

And Etna.

Even in his state, Finley couldn’t forget about Etna. The fear of death had certainly given him a new perspective into his situation, and he wondered if perhaps he had been wrong to push her away so quickly and easily.

What could she be thinkin’? What could she want?

Finley doubted that he would ever find out, but it was only one of

the many regrets he had. He had kept himself away from Malina for so long, and now he would never get to see her grow up. He would never get to apologize for everything that he had done, and he was certain that when she would grow up, she would have few memories of him.

He had missed his chance. He had missed his chance to do so many things.

“Ye havena missed yer chance,” Lochlan said, and it was then that Finley realized that he had been speaking out loud. “Na, if I can help it. Come on, let’s get ye on the horse.”

With that, four hands grasped him tightly, securely, and carried him to Lochlan’s horse. Finley was about to protest, to tell them that he could ride on his own, but his legs barely supported him, and the world spun around him.

It would be a shame to survive this, only to fall off the horse and die.

Once they had gotten everyone on the horses, he slumped forward, Lochlan’s grip the only thing keeping him upright. With every step that the horse took, Finley’s breath was knocked out of him, and he gripped the saddle with tight fingers, knuckles going bone-white under pressure.

The countryside rushed by them, and Finley thought that if he should die, then he wanted to die out there, not in the castle. Not in the darkness of his chambers or the healer’s damp basement, not in the place where he had shut himself for years.

“I’m so sorry, Finley,” he heard Lochlan say behind him. “I’m so verra sorry. I should have been there. I should have fought with ye.”

“It’s alright,” Finley assured him, though even in his state, he couldn’t help but wonder where Lochlan had been.

“Ye canna die,” Lochlan said. “Do ye hear me? I dinna ken what I’ll do if ye die.”

“I hear ye,” Finley assured him with a humorless laugh, one that rattled his ribs and made him wince in pain. “But I’m afraid it’s really na in me hands. It’s in God’s hands, Lochlan.”

“Just stay awake until we make it to the castle,” Lochlan said. “Do ye think ye can do that?”

“Sure,” Finley replied, but it was a lie. He doubted that he could stay awake for much longer, his eyelids getting heavy and impossible to keep open.

Would it be so bad if I rested for a while?

The next moment, the world was black.

Chapter Thirteen

There was a commotion outside that drew Etna to her window. It was late at night, so late that most of the clansmen and women, along with the servants, should be asleep, and yet she could hear people shouting outside, in the courtyard. She could also hear horses and people rushing up and down, and she got out of bed, curious to see what was going on.

Could it be an attack?

When she glanced out of the window, she could hardly see anything in the darkness. There were only a few torches lit, but she could see Lochlan and a few other familiar faces under their incandescence.

Etna immediately knew that something was wrong. Lochlan and the rest of the soldiers weren't supposed to return for several more days, and yet there they were, all of them shouting, covered in blood.

Whose blood? Oh God . . . whose blood?

Etna already knew the answer before she carefully scanned the crowd. It was everyone's blood. She could see no one but Lochlan and one of his soldiers upright, the rest of the men being hauled off their horses by those who had stayed behind.

Panic overtook her, and her hands began to tremble, her heart beating hard and fast in her chest like a drum off-rhythm. She began to think about Finley, dead, and Malina, who would have to grow up all alone, with neither of her parents.

Na . . . na, she willna be alone. Lochlan and Arlene will take care of her. I'll take care of her.

But it wasn't just the thought of Malina growing up as an orphan that had her heart racing and her palms drenched in sweat. No, it was the thought of Finley dead that had shaken her to the core, and she could hardly understand it.

Only hours ago, she had been furious at him. Now, she would do anything to keep him alive.

She didn't have time to analyze her feelings and figure out why the Laird's death could affect her in such a way. Instead, she dressed hastily, wrapping her *earasaid* around her shoulders before she rushed out of the room and made her way down the stairs.

The bottom floor of the castle was in just as much unrest as the courtyard. Servants rushed back and forth, none of them caring about staying silent. The panic that coursed through her was shared, and everyone around her seemed to be in the same state of shock and fear as her.

Etna grabbed the first servant that crossed her path, one of the younger women who worked in the kitchens. "What happened?" she asked her. Her voice was trembling as much as her hands, and her fingers were digging into the woman's arms as she held her. "They werena supposed to . . . they werena preparin' for a fight."

"I dinna ken," the servant told her. She looked terrified, and Etna thought that had something to do with how rough she was being, and so she let her go. For a moment, she was frozen in that spot, unable to move, unable to think, her mind a perfect blank. Hopelessness welled up inside her, and her vision began to go black at the edges, her dread getting the best of her.

Na. I willna stand here and do nothin'.

Etna pushed her way out into the courtyard with a steadying breath, where the soldiers were still gathering the wounded. She bumped her way through the crowd, shoving people aside without care until she got to the injured men.

There's Finley. He . . . he's still alive.

There were two men on each side, holding him up and dragging him along, but out of all the soldiers who had been injured, he was the only one who could still stay upright and, if not walk, then stumble his way inside. Etna's breath caught in her throat when she first saw him when she saw the carnage that had taken place. There was so much blood, their clothes drenched with it, their faces and hands painted crimson. Etna could hardly stand to look at it, the sight making her stomach churn.

"Etna?" Finley asked when he saw her as they were dragging him away, and though Etna reached out to him with her hand, she didn't dare touch him, fearing that she would end up hurting him more. Instead, she let the two men take him into the castle and then searched for Lochlan.

She soon found him giving the last orders to his men. For a few moments, Etna simply watched him as he went from their fearless General to a man who had just seen all his fellow soldiers get wounded, standing at the edge of death. The shift was instantaneous, and the moment he had finished talking to his men, he froze, gaze fixed on an invisible horizon.

"Lochlan?" Etna asked softly as she approached him. It took him a few moments to notice her, but when he did, he shifted once more into the role of the General. "What happened?"

"Ambush," Lochlan said. "Or perhaps the brigands were heading to the village, and when they spotted us, they decided to attack. I dinna ken. All I ken is that we all almost died."

Etna scanned him carefully, her gaze looking for any injuries, but she couldn't see any. "Shouldna ye have the healer take a look at ye?" she asked.

"Na. I'm fine," Lochlan said. "I dinna get injured. Besides, they need him more than I do."

Etna hesitated for a moment, but then the itch to ask about Finley was too much to ignore. “And . . . and the Laird?”

At the mention of Finley, Lochlan froze once more. Etna could see him clenching his jaw, hands curling into fists. “He’s injured. I willna lie to ye, it’s verra bad. They’re all doin’ verra bad.”

It was all that Etna needed to hear. In the years that she had spent alone with her father, in a village that was far away from any healers, she had come to learn many useful things, both from books and from practice. If there was anyone in that castle who could help, it would be her, she knew.

“Take me to them,” she said as she pulled her sleeves up. “I can help.”

Lochlan wasted no time taking her to the healer at the promise of help. Once there, Etna stopped dead in her tracks once more, the sight of the men and the smell of old blood startling her.

There’s na time for this. I canna allow meself to be shaken.

She would have all the time she would need later to process what she had seen and—though she hoped she wouldn’t have to—grieve. As long as she was in that room, she had to focus all her attention on the wounded.

Finley, being the Laird, was already being tended to by the healer, and so Etna began to work on the other men with the help of some of the servants, who were under the healer’s command. She cleaned their wounds and bandaged them the entire time, trying to reassure them that everything would be alright, even though she didn’t know for sure if they would all survive.

Despite her best efforts, some wounds wouldn’t stop bleeding, fractures that she couldn’t fix, so many injuries that could take their lives.

It was only when the healer was done with Finley and began to help the rest of the men, though, that Etna finally allowed herself to stop and, once she was certain that everything was under control with the soldiers, she walked over to Finley, sitting by his side.

He didn't look well. He was pale, alarmingly so, and his lips were dry and chapped. The dried blood still clung to his skin in splotches, and Etna wondered how much of it was his and how much was the blood of his enemies.

When her gaze drifted to the wound on his side, she winced. She couldn't imagine the kind of pain that he was in, even after the healer had given him something to soothe him.

"Etna . . ."

When Finley spoke, his voice was slow and thick, struggling to come out.

"Hush," Etna told him. "Dinna speak. Ye should keep yer strength."

"It's fine," Finley said. "It's na as bad as it looks."

"I think it is, me Laird," Etna told him. It was better than lying to him, better than reassuring him that he was well and having him trying to stand and help. "Ye should rest. I'll stay here if ye need me."

Etna looked at her hands, noticing for the first time that she, too, was covered in blood up to her elbows. The front of her dress was ruined, and sweat dripped down between her shoulder blades, one that was brought forth by fear.

She remembered what Malina had told her that very morning, that Finley was a kind man. In her rage, Etna hadn't listened, but now that she was seeing his gaze drift constantly back to his men, his expression pained from something more than just his injuries, she understood.

He cares. He cares for his people. He just doesn't ken how to show it.

It didn't take long for Lochlan to take Finley to his own chambers with the help of two of their clansmen. Etna followed dutifully behind them, and she was glad that Lochlan didn't ask her why she was staying by Finley's side.

She didn't even have the answer to that question. All she knew was that she wanted to be there for him, to make sure that he would survive the night, even though she was certain that everyone would be keeping an eye on him until he recovered. The need to stay with him was overpowering, and even though she was exhausted by all the work, she was determined to stay awake and watch over him.

"I'll be comin' to see him," Lochlan told her, just as Etna pulled a chair closer to Finley's bed. The moment his head had hit the pillow, he had fallen asleep, and it was a blessing. Any time he spent not being in pain was good in Etna's mind. "Ye dinna have to stay here, Etna. Ye can get some rest."

"I'll be fine," she assured him, waving a hand dismissively. Even after cleaning all the blood off her, she still fancied that she saw it on her skin, clinging onto her. "Ye dinna have to worry. I ken how to take care of him if somethin' happens."

With a grateful nod, Lochlan left, closing the door quietly and leaving Etna alone with Finley. She watched him, reluctant to look away in case his condition worsened within moments, but it soon became clear to her that he had fallen into a peaceful sleep, and so she didn't want to disturb him.

For a long while, she stayed quiet, gazing at Finley and at the sky that she could see from the window. The entire castle had calmed down since the arrival of the soldiers, but Etna knew that everyone was still agitated, that it was all far from over.

How could the brigands have kent that Finley and the others would be passin' by that verra moment? Perhaps there really is a spy in the castle.

Finley's suspicions didn't seem so farfetched anymore, and Etna knew that Lochlan saw it the same way. The incident had forced a weight on his shoulders, a burden that he would have to carry alone until Finley recovered.

It wasn't until later that night, almost at the crack of dawn, that Etna noticed something was wrong. Finley was drenched in sweat, and when she stood to press a hand on his forehead, she found that he was burning up.

Her first instinct was to fetch the healer, but before she could pull back, Finley's hand shot out and grabbed her arm, stopping her.

"Me Laird . . . I must go alert the healer," Etna said in a soothing voice, trying to break Finley's grip. "Ye have a fever. I'll call him to tend to ye."

"Na," Finley said, shaking his head fervently. "Dinna leave."

Etna didn't know what to do. As much as she wanted to call the healer, Finley's grip was strong and his voice demanding. In the end, she decided to appease him for a while, and so she sat back down, grabbing the rag that she had placed earlier on the bedside table and dabbing it in some water before she wiped Finley's forehead, cooling him down.

"I . . . I didna mean to," Finley said then, and Etna frowned, leaning closer. His voice was barely a whisper at first, sounding breathless, but the more he spoke, the louder he became. "I didna, I swear. But it's done, it's all done."

"What's done, me Laird?" Etna asked. "Dinna blame yerself for what happened. Ye couldna have kent that there was an ambush and . . . and all the men are alive! They're still alive."

"Anna . . ."

Anna? His late wife?

“I killed her,” Finley said then, clear as day, his eyes wide as he grabbed Etna once more. “I killed her, and noo she’s gone.”

“I think it’s best if ye leave noo, Etna.”

The voice came from the door, and Etna whipped her head to see Arlene standing there, her hands clasped tightly in front of her.

Chapter Fourteen

Finley had been asleep all day, and Etna didn't dare walk back into his chambers. Even though she knew she wouldn't have to talk to him, knocked out cold as he was, she didn't think that she could bring herself to even look at him after what she had just found out.

How could it be true? How could Finley have killed his own wife?

It sounded impossible to Etna. Finley was many things, difficult, often unlikeable and frustrating, but Etna couldn't bring herself to believe that he was a killer.

But I hardly ken anythin' about him. And he admitted it himself. He confessed.

She didn't know what to believe anymore. Perhaps she was naïve, thinking that Finley was a good man who was incapable of murder. Perhaps it was all true, and she had given a part of her heart to a terrible man.

But she couldn't spend all her time thinking about Finley. She still had to take care of Malina, even more so now that her father was on the brink of death. Though no one had told her any details, it was unavoidable for her to have heard that there was something wrong with the Laird, and Etna hadn't seen her so withdrawn in days.

But her hostility toward Etna hadn't returned. It was only a crippling sadness, one that made her pay no attention to the lesson that Etna was trying to teach her in an attempt to establish some normalcy.

"Malina . . . ye're na payin' attention," she told her, but Malina didn't react. She was clutching her doll tightly in her hand, and for

the first time since Etna had walked into the library that morning, she noticed that she was on the verge of tears, though they never shed.

With a sigh, Etna stood and walked over to her, placing a hand on her shoulder. Still, she didn't know what to say.

Any soothing words that she could have for her were tainted by knowing that the Laird had killed her mother. Even if the Laird survived, Etna didn't know how she could live with that secret. Could she keep it hidden from anyone, just like Arlene had done? Just like Lochlan, most likely, had done?

She couldn't tell Malina that much Etna knew. She was too young to know, and though she would resent her and everyone else if she found out one day, she couldn't do that to her. She wanted to protect her, no matter the cost.

But what about everyone else? His people deserve to ken.

A part of her, a selfish part, wished that Finley had never told her a single word about it. She wished that she wouldn't have to carry that burden on her shoulders, and she didn't even understand why Finley had confessed to her.

Perhaps he thought he was moments from death and wanted absolution.

But absolution wasn't something Etna could give him. She wasn't good at forgiving, and murder wasn't something that she could forgive at all.

"I want to see *Dadaidh*," Malina said then, pulling Etna out of her thoughts. At her request, Etna hesitated. It didn't sound like a good idea to her to allow Malina to see her father, not only because she didn't want him around her but also because the wound and the blood were bound to shock her if she saw them.

At least he had the decency to stay away from Malina all this time.

"I ken, *mo nighean*," Etna told her as she caressed her hair, combing through her locks with her fingers. "But yer *Dadaidh* needs his rest, aye? I'm sure ye'll be able to see him soon."

"Canna I see him noo?" Malina insisted, and finally, the tears began to shed. Etna's heart ached for her, and she wanted nothing more than to give her the whole world, but she had to keep her away from Finley, even if Malina didn't understand the reason.

"Soon," she promised her. "Ye want him to get better, dinna ye?"

Malina nodded silently, wiping her tears with the sleeve of her dress, a habit that Etna hadn't managed to stop yet.

"Then ye'll give him some time," she said. "I'm sure he'll be verra happy to see ye when he wakes up."

And was that not just another lie? Was the Laird ever happy to see his daughter, or did his guilt taint every single moment he spent with her? Surely, if he had even a shred of humanity, he would be drowning in remorse every time he saw something—or someone—that reminded him of Anna.

At least her efforts seemed to have calmed Malina down, and so had the promise that she would see her father soon. Though it was hardly up to Etna, she wanted to delay it as much as possible. She was surprised that Arlene even allowed Finley near Malina, knowing what he had done. Arlene would do nothing to put her granddaughter in danger, so why would she allow Finley to see her?

Could it be that this is all a misunderstandin'? What if he didna ken what he was sayin' because of the fever?

The rest of their lesson was slow, with Malina failing to concentrate most of the time, but Etna could hardly blame her for it. In the end, she decided to end it early and allow her to go play to at least take her mind off her father.

Once Malina was settled in her room, Etna made her way to the gardens, eager for fresh air. She wanted to stop thinking as much, to calm her mind, and she couldn't imagine a better place than among the trees and the rose bushes. The gardens of the castle had been her favorite spot ever since she had gotten there, the only place that the Laird couldn't ruin with his rules. The flowers didn't care if he didn't want them to bloom. They had a mind of their own.

A little later, Lochlan found her, sitting on one of the benches and watching two birds that flew from tree to tree. He sat next to her, his gaze following her own, and the two of them sat side by side in silence for a while.

"Willna ye ask me how the Laird is doin'?" Lochlan asked.

Etna took a deep breath. She didn't want to talk about Finley, but with Lochlan there, the subject was unavoidable. She had half a mind to leave, but she didn't want to be rude and petty.

"How is the Laird doin'?" she asked instead.

"He's doin' weel," Lochlan said, and when Etna turned to look at him, he had a small smile on his lips. "He woke up this mornin', briefly. The fever has gone down. The healer expects a full recovery."

"That's good," Etna said, but even to her own ears, it sounded like a lie. Still, Lochlan didn't make a comment, much to Etna's surprise. Had Arlene not told him what had happened? Could it be that Lochlan himself didn't know about Anna?

"The speech that ye wrote did wonders," Lochlan said, gradually getting more excited now that he knew that his brother would live. "Everyone in the village was impressed by Finley, and I'm sure that they'll stand by his side noo."

"Is that so?"

Etna couldn't share in Lochlan's enthusiasm. Her mind was a whirlwind of mixed emotions, some telling her to trust her instincts and some telling her to trust the facts. She had never been so confused about anyone before, and the fact that she had grown to care about Finley only made it harder.

"Aye," he said. "Ye did a fantastic job, and I'm sure that Finley gained everyone's respect. Everyone's. And then there was the attack, of course, and that was also verra helpful."

Etna frowned at that, confused. "What do ye mean?" she asked. "He didna prevent the attack. Isna that what the villagers have been beggin' for?"

"Aye, but they ken that he couldna have kent they would attack," Lochlan said. "They were just glad that we were there, and they saw him fight for them and run into burning houses for them. They saw him risk his life and be prepared to lay it down for them. Noo they ken that he cares, that he's doin' the best he can."

As Lochlan spoke, Etna was less concerned about the Laird and how likable he was to his people now and more concerned that Lochlan seemed to have no injuries on him. Even the other soldier, who had been able to stand and ride the previous night, had been covered in scrapes and bruises, but not Lochlan. He didn't have a single scratch on him.

Etna knew that the man was rumored to be a mighty soldier, perhaps the best fighter in the entire clan, but even so, she doubted that he could have come out of such an attack completely unscathed.

"Lochlan . . . are ye na hurt at all?" she asked, trying to be subtle about her questioning. Lochlan sighed in a way that told Etna that he had been asked that question many times already.

"I'm na hurt," he admitted. "And I ken what everyone thinks about it. But . . . but it's na like that." Leaning closer, Lochlan dropped his voice into a conspiratorial whisper, making sure that no one else

would hear him. “I invited Mairi to the village,” he said. “She rode out one day after we left, and she met me there. I . . . I was with her at the inn when the attack happened, and I only managed to get there when the fight was almost over.”

Etna thought back to the past several hours, remembering that she hadn’t seen Mairi in a while. Lochlan’s confession made sense, but she wondered what he would say to everyone else to explain his absence since she was one of the few, or perhaps even the only one, who knew about their relationship.

And then she remembered that she wasn’t supposed to know.

With a gasp, Etna feigned surprise, but Lochlan’s smile and the shake of his head were enough to tell her that he already knew.

“Ye caught us one night, did ye na?” he asked her. “I thought it was ye. It’s alright . . . it’s actually a relief to have someone who kens about it.”

“Does na one else ken?”

Lochlan shook his head. “Na. I canna tell anyone. I’ve told Mairi to keep quiet, too.”

“Do ye . . . do ye love her?” Etna asked though it seemed like a question that was too intrusive. The way he spoke about her, though, made her think that it wasn’t just a casual relationship like she had thought at first. At the mere mention of her name, his expression softened, and so did his eyes, an almost imperceptible change if one didn’t look. But Etna was looking.

“I do,” Lochlan confessed, without any further prompting from Etna’s part. He seemed eager to talk about Mairi, and Etna couldn’t blame him, not after having to hide their relationship for so long. Surely, it had started before she had come to the castle, she thought, perhaps much earlier if Lochlan was so in love with her. “But ye ken how these things are.”

“Na, I dinna,” Etna said, giving him an encouraging smile. “What do ye mean? There’s nothin’ keepin’ ye apart, is there?”

“Weel, of course, there is,” Lochlan said. “Me brother. Mairi is a maid, and I’m sure that Finley wants me to marry someone that would help the clan since he canna.”

“If the Laird wishes to have an alliance through marriage, that’s his problem,” Etna said, emboldened by everything that she had found out about Finley. Lochlan shouldn’t care what a man like his brother thought when he was so much kinder than he was. “It’s na yers. If ye love Mairi, ye should be with her.”

“I want to ask for her hand,” Lochlan said. “But I never have the courage to talk to Finley. I think that the moment he finds out, he’ll send her away, and that is the last thing that I want.”

Etna wouldn’t be surprised if Lochlan turned out to be correct. She didn’t know many things about Finley or how his mind operated, but what she did know was that he would want his brother to marry for the good of the clan since he refused to remarry.

“Do ye think that Finley will give me his blessin’?” Lochlan asked, and he sounded so hopeful, so elated, that Etna doubted he had any suspicions about his brother. Had he known what he had done, he would surely be reluctant to speak to him about Mairi.

“I dinna ken, Lochlan,” she told him truthfully, her mind racing. “I hope so, but I dinna ken the Laird weel at all. Ye’re his brother. What do ye think?”

That seemed to give Lochlan pause, and for a moment, his face fell, dejection clear in it. But then he recovered quickly, giving Etna a smile. “I suppose I can only be hopeful,” he said. “I may ken the Laird better than anyone, but even I dinna always ken what’s going on in his mind most of the time. Yer guess is as good as mine.”

And that was what Etna feared, that she was just as likely to be right as Lochlan was. But all she could do was to keep an eye on all

of them, the Laird, Lochlan, Mairi, and even Arlene, to observe them and gather information before she could do or say anything.

A part of her screamed at her to leave, to pack her things and cut her losses before something happened to her, too. But she couldn't leave Malina, not when the girl needed her the most. She had to protect her, too.

"I think I'll do it," Lochlan said, and he sounded so eager that Etna's chest constricted, her heart aching for him. "I think once Finley wakes up, I'll ask him for his blessin'. There's na point in waitin', na when there can be an ambush any day that can take me life. I want to marry her before I die, Etna. There's nothin' more than I want than for her to be me wife."

Lochlan's words were like a balm to her heart. It calmed her to know for certain that at least he was a good man, even if doubt clouded every single thought she had about Finley. But if Lochlan was going to ask Finley for his blessing so soon, then she had to confront Finley first. She had to ensure that she protected both Lochlan and Mairi, as well as the rest of the clan.

She had to know the truth.

"Forgive me, Lochlan," she said as she stood. "I must go see Malina. She's been alone in her chambers for a while, and I dinna want to leave her alone for too long. Na with everythin' that's happenin' in the castle."

"Of course," Lochlan said. "Tell her that Uncle Lochlan will come see her soon. I havena had the chance, what with tendin' to Finley and the soldiers."

"I will," Etna reassured him and then made her way back inside the castle, passing by the kitchens and noticing that Arlene was there. It was the perfect time to visit the Laird, to talk to him without Arlene acting as a buffer. At first, she did go to Malina's chambers, checking up on her, and once she saw that she was fine on her own, she turned around and headed for the Laird's chambers.

It was time for him to wake up and tell Etna the whole truth. She could only hope that he wouldn't confirm her fears.

Chapter Fifteen

Once Etna reached Finley's chambers, she hesitated, her hand hovering over the doorknob. She didn't know if she had the guts to go inside. Her heart hammered in her chest, her ears pulsing along with her heartbeat, and every time she tried to convince herself to just walk inside, her feet simply wouldn't move.

Ach, this is ridiculous. I dinna even ken if he's awake.

It was that thought which finally helped her open the door and step inside, but the moment she laid eyes on Finley, she saw that he was wide awake.

Not just wide awake. He was in a good mood.

Finley was sitting up on the bed, his bed resting against the frame, and when he saw her, a smile spread over his lips as though he was not at all perturbed by his injury. But Etna couldn't return his smile; she couldn't reflect his enthusiasm.

That didn't mean that she didn't want to. It was the first time that she had seen Finley smile, and it only served to make him even more handsome, accentuating his chiseled features. Just looking at him made her heart skip a beat and hammer in her chest, but her sentimentality was nothing but a burden after everything that she had found out.

"Me Laird . . . may I come in?" she asked, even though she was already halfway in the room, as she hadn't expected him to be awake.

"Please, Etna," Finley said, gesturing at the chair that was still by his bedside. "Come in, take a seat."

Etna did as she was told, though she crossed the room hesitantly, her blood rushing through her veins. Soon, she would know the truth, and that almost scared her even more than not knowing.

“The speech that ye wrote did precisely what we needed it to do,” Finley told her. It was odd seeing him so happy. Etna had once thought that if the day ever came that she would see this side of him, she would be happy, too, his joy becoming contagious, but that ended up not being the case.

“The villagers have put their faith in me once more,” Finley continued. “They believe in me again, all thanks to ye, Etna. Ye’ve done a marvelous job at—”

Then Finley paused and looked at Etna with a puzzled look on his face, as though he could sense that something was wrong. And perhaps he could; Etna wasn’t trying to hide her worry. She was certain that it showed on her face, etched into every line and curve.

“What is it?” Finley asked. “Why are ye lookin’ at me like this?”

Suddenly, he sounded severe, his old self returning. He was building up a wall around him, Etna knew, and she couldn’t have that. She couldn’t leave that room without an explanation.

“Do ye na remember what ye told me last night?” she asked, and when Finley didn’t reply, she added, “About Anna.”

At the mention of his late wife’s name, Finley’s skin, which had gained some color during the day, went back to being ghostly pale. He gulped, and Etna could see the panic in his eyes as she looked at him, scrutinizing his every move.

“It’s na what ye think,” Finley said. His voice was a weak whisper, barely audible, subdued by what Etna could only assume was shame. “I . . . I dinna ken what I said, but whatever I said, it’s na what ye think.”

“How can ye say that?” Etna asked, moving away from him. “How can ye say it’s na what I think if ye dinna even remember what ye told me? I want a straight answer, me Laird. Did ye kill her?”

Finley didn’t speak. Etna could see that his hands had begun to tremble, but so had her own. She was as agitated as he seemed to be, the entire matter so incomprehensible that she had a hard time reconciling the man in front of her with the man who could have committed the crime.

His silence was admission enough for Etna, and she turned to leave, unable to look at the man any longer. He had not only taken a life, but he had also caused so much pain to Malina, leaving her without a mother for the rest of her life. He had taken something from her that could never be replaced, and Etna didn’t know how anyone could forgive that. She certainly couldn’t.

Just as she turned to leave, though, Finley’s hand shot out and grabbed her, stopping her before she could get too far.

“Please . . . if ye listen to me, I can explain everythin’,” he said. “All I’m askin’ for is for ye to listen to me.”

“Did ye kill her?” Etna asked once more, her mouth firmly set into a thin line. “Did the attack that everyone kens about even happen? Did ye only say it did to cover up the truth? “Etna, please.”

Finley’s tone was so pleading and desperate that Etna couldn’t help but look at him. When she did, the vulnerability that she saw took her by surprise, her breath catching in her throat. Finley’s hand was a branding iron against her arm, where he was holding her, and for a moment, Etna forgot why she despised him so much.

But only for a moment. She couldn’t allow him to sway her.

“Ye deserve an explanation, and I deserve someone to listen,” Finley said as he let go of her. “I willna force ye to listen to me, but I’m askin’ ye to. Please . . . sit back down.”

Etna's gaze traveled between the chair and the door and, after several moments of contemplation, she took a seat once more. The relief on Finley's face was evident. He let out a sigh, but just as he opened his mouth to speak, he closed it once more, staying silent instead.

"If ye have nothin' to say to me, I should leave," Etna said, but Finley was quick to shake his head.

"Na. I just . . . I only need a few moments," Finley replied. As Etna watched him in silence, she wondered if he would ever stop being a mystery to her. "What I said was right. I did kill Anna. But ye must understand, I didna mean to kill her. It was all an accident."

Etna didn't know what to believe anymore, but she didn't speak. She wanted to hear the entire story from Finley's side before she said anything, and so she remained quiet, watching him expectantly as a silent invitation to continue.

"One day, Anna asked me to go on a horseback ride," Finley continued. The very words he was speaking seemed to pain him, coming out of his mouth with great difficulty, but he pushed through it. "That was a while after we had Malina, and all that time, we were driftin' apart. I loved Anna with all me heart. She was the only one for me, and I spent so long thinkin' that she had begun to resent me or to na love me anymore. We spent so little time together then that I thought she didna want to see me. But when she asked me to go with her on that ride, I thought that whatever it was had passed. I thought she loved me again . . . or perhaps she had never stopped lovin' me, that she was just too busy with Malina to spend any time with me.

"I remember it was a beautiful day, and so she wanted to stray further and further from the castle. I indulged her, of course . . . I didna want her to have any reason to turn against me. I wanted her to be happy, and I was willin' to do anythin' for it. So, we rode out to the edges of the hill. It's verra bonnie out there. Ye can see all the way to the sea, and the sky stretches on forever. I could see why she wanted to go there."

As Etna listened to Finley, he didn't sound to her like a murderer. He only sounded like a man who had loved his wife fiercely, and so she began to question her conclusions, not because of Finley's words, but because of the way that he was telling the story. There was a slight tremble in his voice, one that he tried to mask by clearing his throat, and though he wouldn't meet her gaze, she could see that his eyes were glistening with unshed tears.

That's na what murderers look like. Finley's na that good at actin'.

"I remember Anna was singin' her favorite song," Finley continued. "How I loved to hear her sing . . . she had a beautiful voice, and I liked nothin' more than to listen to her. And then . . . I dinna ken what happened, but as we were ridin', somethin' hit me on the head. I fell off me horse. I was unconscious for a while, and when I awoke, someone was pressin' me face into the dirt, tryin' to kill me. Whoever it was, he was a small man. He couldna hold me down easily, and I was fightin' for me life. I was tryin' to get him off me with everythin' I had, every ounce of strength.

"When I felt the knife dig into my back, I kent that I had to throw him off me or he would kill me for good. He was a stubborn one, but he couldna cling onto me, na with the way I was buckin' and thrashin'. And then he was gone before I could even take a look at his face, disappearin' in the woods."

Etna had so many questions that she wanted to ask Finley. Did the man somehow kill Anna, and Finley blamed himself for it? For not being able to protect her? Did he ever find out who the man was?

But as many questions, as she had for him, she didn't ask any of them. Finley paused only for a few moments before he resumed his story.

"I was so worried about Anna," he said. "She was me whole world, and I thought that the brigand had killed her. It didna matter how much pain I was in. I could hardly stand after he stabbed me, and if the knife had gotten any deeper, I'd be long gone, but I stayed awake, and I called for her. Ye canna imagine my relief when I saw

her walk toward me. She was like an angel, always so beautiful. I tried to reach for her, and it was then that I noticed that my arm was broken from the fall, but still . . . I used all my strength to stand up and go to her. I wanted to tell her that everythin' would be fine, that she didna have to worry.

“But there was no worry in her face, only rage. I still remember how angry she looked. I had never seen her like that before, and I never thought that she'd have so much anger reserved just for me. She was like a different woman, nothin' like the woman I had married. I remember seein' the knife in her hand and askin' her what she was doin', but she never gave me any explanation, any reason. She just . . . she just lunged at me, tryin' to kill me. And I didna want to harm her, ye must believe me, Etna. I didna want to cause her any harm. I just wanted to talk to her, to understand why she was doin' what she was doin'. I tried to push her away from me, to save meself, but she cut me face before I could. That's how I got the scar.”

Finley pointed at the scar on his face, the one that ran from his eyebrow to his cheek. Etna would have never guessed that his own wife had given him that scar. It seemed like such a vicious act, especially against someone that Anna was supposed to love.

“And then . . . when I pushed her . . .” Finley could hardly get the words past his lips. He was struggling with the memories, a tear falling down his cheek before he wiped it off furiously, refusing to cry in front of Etna. “I didna mean to, ye must believe me. I didna. I never wanted to kill her.”

“What happened?” Etna urged then, reaching out and grabbing Finley's hand in her own. “What happened to her?”

“She fell off the cliff.” Finley's voice was hushed, so much that it took Etna a few moments to understand what he had said. “I pushed her too hard. I ken that I shouldna have. I ken that it's na an excuse. But I didna mean to kill her. She was the love of me life. I would have let her kill me if it meant that she would live.”

Etna didn't doubt Finley's words for a moment. For the first time ever since she had met him, she saw the boy that her father had described to her, the kind one who would do anything for the people he loved. His words seemed to her to be the sincerest thing that he had ever told her, and her instincts told her that it was all true.

Finley had carried so much pain inside him for so many years. Everything made sense to Etna now, the misplaced anger, guilt, and complete deterioration of the man he used to be. She wanted nothing more than to fix it, to fix him, but there was nothing that she could do after all the tragedy that he had experienced.

"Me Laird, I . . . I dinna ken—"

"Ye dinna have to say anythin'," Finley assured her. Though he didn't seem cheerful to her anymore by any means, he did look relieved, as though a weight had been lifted off him. "Ye finally gave me the chance to confess me sin. I am grateful for that."

Etna stayed silent for a few moments, trying to digest everything that Finley had just told her, but she still had all these questions that needed answers.

"But why would yer wife try to kill ye?" she asked. "And who was the other man?"

Finley shook his head. "I dinna ken. I dinna have the answer to either of those questions. All I ken is that even though I didna mean to, I killed her, and since then, I havena managed to overcome it. I canna . . . I canna even look at me own daughter. It pains me too much to ken that I'm the reason her maither isna here."

"It's na yer fault," Etna said firmly as she moved from the chair to the bed, holding Finley's hand tightly in her own. "It isna. Ye couldna have done anythin' else."

"Etna . . ."

Before Finley could speak another word, Etna leaned closer and kissed him.

Chapter Sixteen

Finley's lips were soft and warm against Etna's own. Though he was still weak, he kissed her back with the same fervor, as though he wanted to devour her whole. Etna sighed softly into the kiss, desire coursing through her entire body like a drug.

When they parted, she saw that his lips were cherry red from her ministrations, and she could only imagine that she looked the same.

"It wasna yer fault," she repeated, this time whispering against his lips. "The only mistake that ye've made is that ye pulled yerself away from yer daughter, but it's na too late to fix that. It's na, Finley. She loves ye so much . . . if only ye kent."

At the mention of Malina, Etna felt Finley's body go rigid, every muscle in it stiffening. But as uncomfortable as the topic made him, she wanted him to know that he had to let go of his guilt when it came to Malina.

"Listen to me," she said softly, pulling back just enough to look into his eyes. "She loves ye, Finley. She's yer daughter. And she misses ye so, so much."

"I . . . I miss her, too," Finley admitted, and as he spoke, he sat up even further, wrapping his arms around Etna and holding her close, as though he feared that if he relaxed his grip, she would disappear into thin air. "I dinna want to keep meself away from her, but I canna look at her. She reminds me so much of Anna and . . . and of what I have done."

Extricating herself from Finley's grip, Etna cupped his face with both hands, forcing him to meet her gaze. "Perhaps one day ye'll have to tell her, but that day isna noo. What she needs noo is her faither. Even if it pains ye to look at her, ye have to do it. Ye have

to do it for her.”

Etna saw Finley’s breath hitch as she spoke to him, and then he took her hands in his own, bringing them to his lips and pressing kisses on her knuckles.

“Ye’re right,” he said. “I’ve been a coward. I’ve been avoidin’ her because I’m too weak to face her.”

“Hush,” Etna said. “Ye’re na a coward. Ye’re a man who has been through too much. But when ye see her . . . Finley, ye may say that she looks like her maither, but she has yer eyes. Ye shouldna be afraid to meet her.”

For a few moments, Finley looked at her as though he was searching for something in her gaze, proof that she was telling him the truth. When he spoke again, he did so in a soft voice, softer than Etna had ever expected to hear from him.

“I kent that I wanted ye since the first time I met ye in that hallway,” he confessed. “Even if I didna see yer face then, yer scent lingered . . . it stayed with me. I kent that I had to have ye. To make ye mine.”

Before Finley had even managed to finish his sentence, Etna was kissing him again, pouring all her sympathy for him into that kiss. She wanted to show him that there was nothing to forgive, after all. She wanted to show him that she understood why he had done everything he had done in the past few years and why he had to become the man he was.

He was only protectin’ himself from more harm. How can I blame him for that? How can anyone?

If only the people knew what he had been through, they wouldn’t be so harsh on him. But it seemed as though Finley had told no one but her, and perhaps Arlene. Everyone else was in the dark, and Finley had to carry that weight all alone.

It was unfair to him, but at least now she could share his burden. She could carry it along with him.

When Finley pulled Etna closer, lying back down on the mattress, she stopped, placing a hand on his chest. “Ye’re hurt,” she reminded him. “I dinna want to hurt ye any further.”

“Ye willna,” Finley replied, already out of breath. “I promise ye, I’ll be fine.”

His lips sought hers out once more, and this time, Etna allowed him to pull her on top of him, though she was still mindful of his injuries. His roaming hands found her hips as they kissed, and Etna moaned as she felt his fingers dig into her flesh in a possessive manner.

Finley was already shirtless, something that Etna hadn’t paid attention to until the sheet covering his torso was pushed aside by their movements. With slow, careful fingers, she explored his body, feeling the hard muscles of his abdomen under her hands, the heat of his skin, the coarse hairs that were spattered on his chest. As they kissed, his stubble was rough against her soft skin in the most delicious way, and she wanted nothing more than to feel him everywhere.

Hastily, Etna pulled back, trying to undress. Finley helped her with eager hands, their fingers constantly colliding in their hurry as they tried to unlace her corset, and once all the garments she was wearing were on the floor, she knelt on the mattress before him, her hands being the only thing that she could use to hide her body.

“Dinna hide yerself,” Finley told her as he took her hands and made Etna reveal herself. “I wanna see ye. Ye never have to hide from me.”

Etna was flaming hot under Finley’s scrutiny, her cheeks a bright shade of red that crept down to her chest. Still, she tried to force down her embarrassment, and soon, the hunger that she saw in Finley’s eyes as he gazed at her emboldened her.

No one had ever looked at her like that before. No one had touched her like Finley was touching her, his hands trailing down her body, from her breasts to her thighs.

“Ye’re the bonniest thing in the world,” he told her, just as one of his hands found its way between her legs, touching that sensitive spot that had Etna seeing stars behind her eyelids, his thumb moving in circles against her and making her cry out in pleasure. She could do little other than grip onto Finley’s shoulder, the new sensations too much and not enough at the same time, her hips moving on their own accord as they chased the pleasure that Finley was giving her.

As Finley pushed the covers off him completely, Etna saw that he was completely naked, his manhood firm and straining against his stomach. She swallowed the lump in her throat at the sight of it, her inexperience getting the better of her, but she decided that she would simply have to trust him. After all, she was certain that he knew very well what he was doing, judging by the jolts of pleasure that traveled through her body.

Pulling her down onto the bed, Finley continued lavishing Etna with attention. When she felt one of his fingers slip inside of her, she gasped, and her gasp was followed by a wanton moan that surprised even her.

Tentatively, Etna reached for Finley, wrapping her hand around his length. He felt strong and heavy under her fingers, and the groan that escaped his lips gave her the push she needed to act, stroking him in time with his own movements. Her lips found his again, and the two of them moved in unison, slowly exploring each other’s bodies.

“Etna . . . Etna, I want ye,” Finley mumbled in her ear, shifting on the bed so that he could nip and kiss the sensitive flesh of her neck. He continued to whisper sweet nothings as he moved lower and lower, kissing his way down her chest and wrapping his lips around her nipple, sucking and pulling on the bud until Etna screamed in delight.

At the sudden loss of Finley's touch, Etna whined, wanting him back. But it wasn't long before Finley moved onto his back, pulling her on top of him.

"I'm afraid I canna move much, lass," he told her. "But next time . . . I promise ye, next time, I willna let ye move a muscle."

The promise was exhilarating to Etna, but so was the prospect of taking control. Her shyness had been replaced by an overpowering need for Finley, and nothing was stopping her from getting what she wanted and giving him what he wanted in return. She let him gaze at her body, at the curves of her breasts and her hips, at the folds between her legs that he seemed to so madly desire. Her wetness spread over her at the thought that Finley wanted nothing more than to make her his, and a quiver ran through her body when their gazes met, Finley pinning her with his own.

He had so much power, even when he was doing nothing.

As she straddled his hips, Finley's hands came to rest on her hips, guiding her. At the first push of Finley's manhood inside her, Etna shivered, her entire body reacting to that one point of contact.

He felt so big, impossibly so, and Etna's thighs trembled as she began to roll her hips slowly, trying to learn what both of them liked. Their moans mingled in the air as she took him deeper and deeper inside of her, sinking all the way down onto his manhood, and Etna wanted nothing more than for that delectable sensation to last forever.

Finley's hands moved to her breasts, cupping the full mounds as Etna leaned forward, her hands coming to rest on his shoulders for support. She was lost in her desire for him, her body taking over and erasing every other thought from her mind, and she called out his name over and over like a litany. He replied with moans of his own, hips snapping off the bed as he chased his pleasure.

Their bodies were moving as one, Finley's hands roaming all over Etna's own body as though he didn't know what part of her he

wanted to touch the most, his hunger for her evident in his punishing grip. Etna had never felt as desired as she did when she looked into his eyes, his gaze boring right through her.

It didn't take long for Finley to begin to ignore his wound, his yearning for Etna overpowering any pain that he could feel. He took control, flipping them over so that he was on top of her, and thrust into her with such force that he shook the entire bed.

When Finley grabbed her wrists, pinning them over her head on the mattress, Etna was completely gone. She loved him like that, primal and without a care in the world, taking her the way that he wanted. The pleasure built up inside of her, deep in her belly, an insistent heat that demanded release.

"I want . . . to see ye . . . fall apart," Finley said, his words accentuated by sharp thrusts of his hips. It didn't take long for Etna to follow his command, her body pulsing from head to toe as she reached her climax. She closed her eyes firmly shut, the aftershocks of her orgasm leaving her trembling and shaking, covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Her breath was short and hard, her lungs cooperating with her just as little as her heavy limbs.

Only moments later, Finley followed, spilling himself inside of her with a shout of her name. For a few moments, he hovered over Etna, trying to catch his breath, before he collapsed beside her, chest heaving and lips stretching into an easy smile.

Etna turned to look at him. She felt so relaxed, even though nothing had exerted her quite as much as their lovemaking before.

"Did I hurt ye?" she asked him, her fingers brushing gently near the wound on his side.

"Shouldna I be askin' that question?" Finley asked. "Na, lass . . . ye didna hurt me. Did I hurt ye?"

Etna shook her head. "Na . . . na at all."

Etna brought her head to Finley's chest with a sigh, resting it there, and he began to stroke her hair gently, fingers combing through it. They stayed silent for a while, content to just be in each other's presence, but Etna couldn't stop thinking about the future.

What did it mean for them? What were they to each other now that they had made love? Etna didn't know anymore, nor did she know how to bring up that topic. Perhaps the time wasn't right for it anyway, but what would the right time be?

She wished that she could simply enjoy the moment without worrying about the future, but the future was the reason why she had gone to that castle in the first place. She was chasing her lifelong dream, and at the same time, she was trying to get back to Edinburgh. How could she abandon that plan when it was all that she had wanted for so long?

Perhaps na of that matters. Finley never said anythin' about the future, so why am I thinkin' about it?

All she knew was that Finley wanted her, and she wanted him. It seemed like she had become the mistress that she had once feared he had.

"What's on yer mind?" Finley asked, and it seemed to Etna that he was more perceptive than he liked to show, just like his daughter. She huffed out a soft laugh, shaking her head.

"Nothin'," she said. "Just . . . just everythin' that has happened."

"Has anyone told ye that ye think too much?"

"I dinna think that ye have any right to lecture me on that," Etna retorted, but there was no bite behind her words. Besides, Finley was right. She *was* thinking too much, and she wanted to stop, to take her mind off everything. "Kiss me."

Finley did as he was told, pressing his lips on her own, but Etna

wanted more. She licked the seam of his lips with her tongue, deepening the kiss, trying to lose herself in Finley once more.

“Eager, are we?” Finley asked with a snort. “I dinna think that I can go again so soon.”

“Just kiss me, Finley,” Etna told him, and he ended up indulging her again.

Perhaps what happens in the future doesn't matter right the now. All that matters is that at this moment, he's mine, and I'm his.

No matter what happened between them, she would always have the memory of their first time.

Chapter Seventeen

Finley didn't know whether to curse or to thank his luck. On the one hand, his wounds meant that he could hardly get out of bed, his entire body aching with the effort every time that he tried to stand up. On the other hand, they had brought him and Etna closer, so close, in fact, that they had shared a night together.

And it had been a night that Finley doubted he would ever forget. The way Etna had moved against him, the way their bodies fit together like they were always meant to be one, her lips, her hands. It was all etched into his memory, and it replayed over and over in his mind.

But it was more than that. Sharing his pain with her was what had changed the most for Finley. After confessing what he had done, it was suddenly easier to breathe, even to simply exist, as though a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. Though the memory of Anna still pained him, knowing that Etna didn't blame him for what he had done was a small mercy, one that he welcomed with open arms.

He had never managed to tell that story to anyone before. Only Arlene had heard some of it, but Finley had never told her the entire story. His own grief and the certainty that whoever heard the truth would immediately despise him had forced him to keep his lips sealed for years, hiding away from the world to conceal his shame and his guilt.

But now, the very sun seemed brighter to him. He hadn't been so cheerful in years, and it was strange to feel so light again, so unburdened and optimistic. His room, which he usually kept dark, was now filled with the morning sun after he had a servant open the curtains, and for the first time in a while, he could appreciate it, and he didn't have the urge to withdraw back to the shadows.

“Ye seem to be in a good mood.”

The familiar voice came from the door, and Finley turned to see Lochlan standing there, watching him with an amused smile on his face. Finley could only shrug in reply, not knowing how to explain his sudden transformation to his brother. He barely understood it himself, and he was just as surprised as Lochlan that Etna had had such an effect on him.

“How are ye feelin’?” Lochlan asked as he stepped inside Finley’s chambers, pulling a chair closer to his bed before sitting down. “Ye look better today.”

“Aye, I feel better,” Finley confirmed. In the past few days, ever since they had returned to the castle, he had been healing well, though the healer had warned him that it would take him a while to get back to normal. He still had a long road ahead of him, but at least he wasn’t in any danger of dying anymore. “What about the others? How are the lads doin’? Did ye hear from the village?”

“Everyone is fine,” Lochlan said. “Dinna worry. The village is fine, too. They’re rebuildin’ what was destroyed in the fire, and the few who were injured are healin’ weel.”

Finley let out a sigh of relief. He had been waiting to hear news about the village for days, and the thought that his people were suffering was keeping him up at night. Knowing that his men were also healing did its part in reassuring him, too.

“So . . . how come ye’re like . . . this?” Lochlan asked.

Subtle as always, me brother.

“I dinna ken what ye mean,” Finley said, though he knew very well. He also knew, though, that if he didn’t readily offer any information, Lochlan wouldn’t push him to say more, and he used that knowledge to his advantage. He didn’t want to talk about what had happened between him and Etna, not quite yet. A part of him thought that it was all too good to be true, and so he didn’t want to

risk telling Lochlan about it in case none of it would last. Though he didn't fail to see how paranoid that made him, it wouldn't be the first time that something seemingly great would go wrong for him.

As Finley expected, Lochlan didn't pursue the issue. Instead, he said, "Weel, whatever it is, it's makin' grandmaither happy, too. It's nice to have ye back, Finley."

Finley could do little other than nod, the sincerity and the openness with which Lochlan had spoken those words moving him. He had never considered how much he and their grandmother would miss his old self and how much they would want him to return to how he used to be before Anna's death. He had been selfish, so selfish that he had never taken a moment to think about them in all those years. But still, neither of them had given up on him, and Finley was grateful for that. He only needed to make it up to them, to show them that he regretted everything.

Before Lochlan could say anything else, there was a knock on the door, and Etna entered hesitantly, perhaps having heard Lochlan's voice. But Lochlan was quick to usher her in.

"Come, Etna," he told her as he stood from the chair. "I must take me leave anyway. I should visit the men, see how they're doin'."

As he left, Lochlan gave Finley a wink, and it was then that he realized that his brother knew much more than he let on. At least he had kept quiet about it, and he hadn't nagged him, Finley thought.

When Lochlan was gone, Etna took his place on the chair. Finley reached for her hand, holding it in his own and bringing it to his lips to press a kiss on her knuckles.

"I'm glad ye came," he said, just as he told her every time she came into his room. He was always glad to see her, always eager to have her by his side.

"Ye say that every time," Etna pointed out with a smile. "I come

visit ye every day, Finley.”

“Aye, and every day I’m glad,” he said.

Etna was like a breath of fresh air every time that he saw her. Those green eyes of hers drew Finley in, and he could never resist their pull. She looked so beautiful, framed by the morning light in his room, and he had half a mind to pull her on top of him and have his way with her, but his wounds still ached.

For a few moments, Etna remained quiet, but Finley could see that there was something she wanted to say to him. He waited, looking at her expectantly, until Etna took a deep breath, preparing to speak.

“Ye need to see Malina,” she said.

With a sigh, Finley let her hand go, and his head fall back against the headboard. He had feared that the day would come when Etna would try to force him to see Malina, but he hadn’t expected that day would come so soon.

“Etna, I . . . I canna,” he said. “How will I face her? After everythin’, I told ye? After what I did?”

“I’ve already told ye that Malina loves ye, Finley,” Etna said. “There’s na doubt about that in me mind. Ye should hear how she speaks about ye . . . always so eager to defend ye. She wants nothin’ more than to have ye in her life.”

“I canna,” Finley insisted, shaking his head vehemently. It all sounded good in theory, but he knew that the moment he would lay his eyes upon her, the memories would rush back to him, and he wouldn’t be able to hold it together. Anna’s ghost still lingered over him after all those years and being around Malina only worsened his guilt. He didn’t want her to see him in that state. He didn’t want her to remember him like that.

“Ye must.” Etna’s voice was firm, almost cold, and she reached for Finley’s hand once more, lacing their fingers together. “Ye have a duty as her faither. Ye have a responsibility. Ye’ve already caused her enough anguish, Finley.”

Finley knew that Malina missed him and that she wanted him to be more involved in her upbringing. He wanted the very same thing, but he feared that his presence in her life would only end up hurting her more.

Isna it better to grow up without a faither than to grow up with a faither who killed her maither? I took anna away from her. I’ve already caused her so much pain.

“It’s better for her to na ken who her faither is,” Finley insisted. “One day, she’ll ken the truth. It canna stay hidden forever.”

“One day, perhaps,” Etna said. “But I’m sure that even if she finds out, she’ll forgive ye. What ye did wasna yer fault. Ye only acted to save yer life.”

“That doesna make it any better,” Finley said. “I have wished so many times that I could change what happened just so that Malina wouldna have to grow up without a maither.”

“So why are ye forcin’ her to grow up without a faither, too?”

Finley closed his eyes, bringing his free hand to his nose and pinching the bridge with a sigh. He couldn’t argue with Etna’s logic, no matter how much he wished he could.

“I suppose that’s why I have ye writin’ me speeches,” he said, drawing a laugh out of Etna.

Would it really be so bad if I saw her? Would she truly hate me?

There was only one way to find out, Finley decided. “Fine,” he said. “I’ll see her. Ye’re right, lass, I shouldna take away the only parent

that she has left.”

The satisfied look on Etna’s face was enough to make him wince as he thought about everything that could go wrong with that meeting. Malina could hate him. She could be scared of him and the scar that ran down his face. Perhaps she wouldn’t even remember him at all.

Finley didn’t know which one of those prospects scared him the most.

“Weel?” Etna asked, looking at him expectantly. “Get up, then.”

“What?” Finley asked, blinking in confusion.

“Get up,” Etna repeated as she stood, placing her hands on her hips and tapping her foot impatiently against the floor. “Ye’re goin’ to see her.”

“Noo?”

“Aye, noo,” Etna said. “When else? Why would ye delay it any further?”

The mere thought of meeting Malina right then had cold sweat dripping down Finley’s back. It was too sudden, too soon, and he didn’t even know what he should say to her. His stomach twisted into a knot, and suddenly, he wanted nothing more than to retreat back to the shadows, where it was comfortable and familiar.

But that was what had gotten him there in the first place, he reminded himself. There was no use trying to hide anymore. Etna would find him wherever he would hide, and she would drag him out, no matter what it took.

And Finley was grateful for that.

“I ken that ye can do it,” she said, her tone softening. “I do. Come

noo . . . it's time."

Etna's words gave Finley the courage that he needed to stand, though he did so slowly, his entire body protesting at the movements. Etna helped him dress, and by the time they were out of the door, his heart was hammering in his chest, threatening to rip its way out of his ribcage.

He hadn't talked to Malina when she was awake since the incident. Whenever he visited her, he made sure that it was late at night when she and everyone else were asleep, and he only ever stayed in her room long enough to tell her that he loved her. But now, everything would be different. Malina would look at him, and Finley would have to find the words to tell her how sorry he was, something that he deemed impossible.

No words were enough, and he knew that. Whatever he could tell her would be too little.

Etna led him through the castle, one arm around his shoulders to assist him as they walked. When they made it to the library, Finley hesitated in front of the door, his hand hovering over the doorknob.

"Go on," Etna urged him. "She's waitin' for her faither."

With a decisive nod, Finley opened the door to the library. The first thing he saw was Malina, sitting in an armchair with a book in her lap, and his heart skipped a beat, his breath catching in his throat.

And then she smiled at him, a beautiful, brilliant smile that melted Finley's heart.

Chapter Eighteen

Finley took a few hesitant steps toward Malina. His knees were trembling, and so were his hands, palms soaked with sweat as he tentatively approached her, heart hammering in his chest as if instead of his daughter, it was a wild boar in front of him.

He would have rather seen a wild boar. At least he knew how to handle them.

But Malina's smile only widened the closer Finley got to her, and that gave him the courage he needed to reach for her and grab her in his arms, holding her close.

"Papa!" Malina shouted, her own little arms wrapping tightly around him.

She remembers me. She kens who I am.

Finley had been terrified that Malina wouldn't even recognize him, let alone be happy to see him, but she had already proved him wrong. He had missed her dearly, and now that he could finally hold her again, now that he could finally look at her and speak to her, his chest felt tighter than ever, regret crashing over him. He had spent too long away from her, and there was no way he could get those moments that he had missed back. Everything he knew about his daughter was through what Lochlan and Arlene had told him and from the glances he had stolen through the window of his study whenever she was playing outside. He often watched her from afar, always wondering how she could still be such a happy child after everything she had gone through. He wished that he had been a wiser man, wise enough to not withdraw from her out of cowardice.

But what is done is done.

Finley could only promise himself that he wouldn't let another moment pass without being in Malina's life.

When Malina pulled back, gazing at Finley, his first instinct was to look away, to hide that scar on his face. But before he could do so, she reached out, fingers gently running over the scar. The simple gesture made Finley's heart skip a beat, and the smile that Malina gave him told him that she wasn't afraid of that scar.

"How I've missed ye, *mo nighean*," Finley told her. Etna had been right. Malina had his eyes, and, in fact, she resembled him more than she resembled Anna. When Finley looked at her properly for the first time after all those years, in the light of the morning instead of the darkness of her chambers, he saw that she was the spitting image of him.

"I've missed ye, too, Papa," Malina said. Hearing her voice was enough to have Finley fighting back tears, knowing that he had neglected her for so long, and he pulled her close to his chest once more, his embrace almost suffocating.

He didn't know what to tell her first. In fact, he didn't know what to say at all, overwhelmed as he was. Whatever questions he had, whatever pleas for forgiveness, died in his throat before they could make it past his lips, leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

Does she ken how sorry I am? Does she understand?

Lochlan had once told him that Malina was much more perceptive than Finley thought and that she already knew more than she let on. But he told himself it didn't matter. Even if she already knew that he was sorry for everything, he had to tell her. He had to force those words out, no matter how painful it was for him.

"I'm sorry," he told her, his voice barely audible even in the quiet of the room.

I'm sorry for leavin' ye all alone. I'm sorry for takin' away yer maither.

Though he didn't speak those words, they hung heavy over him, a dark cloud that even Malina's presence couldn't lift. A part of him wished that he could tell her the truth. She deserved to know what had happened to Anna, and she deserved to have the chance to hate him if that would be what the news would bring forth.

But Malina was too young for that, and Finley couldn't bring himself to tell her the truth.

And so, Finley fell silent once more, racking his brain in another futile attempt to speak to Malina. He didn't even know how to speak to Lochlan and Etna most of the time, let alone Malina, who was only a child.

But he didn't have to torture himself for too long, as Malina soon took the reins, opening the book that she was holding in her lap to the first page.

"Papa, can you read it to me?" she asked as she slid onto the floor, sitting down with her back against the armchair. Then, she tugged onto his sleeve, an invitation that Finley couldn't ignore.

As he sat down next to her, he wrapped one arm around her shoulders and held the book open in front of them, skimming through the first few lines. It was no book that he recognized as belonging to him, so he thought Etna must have brought it with her.

When he glanced at the door, his gaze seeking her out, he found that it was closed and that she had left the two of them alone.

And the thought didn't alarm him nearly as much as he would have thought.



* * *

Etna had only stayed in the library long enough to ensure that Finley wouldn't panic in front of Malina and attempt an escape. The last thing that she wanted—and the last thing that Malina needed—was for Finley to become fearful once more and reject Malina right to her face. Etna doubted that the child would ever recover from that, and so she stayed by the door, ready to talk some sense into Finley if he tried to leave.

But Finley hadn't tried to leave at all. At first, Etna could see that panic had gripped him from how he wobbled on his knees as he walked toward his daughter and from the hesitation in his steps, but it didn't take him long to see that there was nothing to be afraid of.

Seeing them together had put a smile on Etna's face. She had never seen Malina so happy before, and that grin on her lips was the most beautiful thing that Etna had seen.

And at that moment, Etna knew that there was nothing for her to worry about. She had left the two of them alone, giving them the time that they needed to get to know each other, and she didn't expect to see either of them come out of that room any time soon. Finley was bound to want to make up for all the lost time, and Malina had shown her just how talkative she can be after the first few weeks.

Etna had hardly made it past the castle doors on her way to the gardens when she stumbled into Lochlan, who was making his way inside.

“Etna!” he exclaimed. “Just who I wanted to see!”

Before Etna could ask what Lochlan meant, he handed her a letter. Etna took it in her hands, frowning at the expression on Lochlan’s face, which she could only describe as ecstatic.

“Good news for ye,” he said, just as Etna saw the name of the sender.

Faither!

Ripping the letter open in haste, Etna could hardly contain her enthusiasm. Ever since she had left her home, she had missed her father more than anything, and she couldn’t wait to see him again. Every letter she received from him was precious. His letters were the only thing that had kept her sane in that castle when she had first arrived.

My dear Etna,

I am so glad that I received the invitation to visit. I am already packing, and I have arranged everything for the trip to the castle. I will see you soon, and I hope to find you happy, despite everything you have written to me in the past few weeks.

But my darling, if you hate it so terribly, then I will collect you and take you back home with me on the way back. I cannot bear to think that you may be unhappy there. I am certain that the Laird will understand.

Your loving Father

“Surprise!” Lochlan said, clapping his hands together in glee. “We all kent that grandmaither invited yer faither to stay with us, but we didna want to tell ye before ye received his letter.”

Just like Lochlan, Etna could hardly contain her excitement. “How long have ye kent?” she asked. “Oh, I wish ye would have told me!”

But of course, Etna couldn't be mad at Lochlan about it. If anything, a part of her wished that she wouldn't have found out at all until her father came to the castle since she didn't think she would be able to sleep until his arrival.

"If I had told ye, then it wouldna have been a surprise," Lochlan said.

"I dinna ken how to thank ye and yer grandmaither," Etna told him, clutching onto the piece of paper with all her might.

"Ye dinna need to thank any of us," Lochlan assured her. "We all love yer faither. Besides . . . weel, after everythin' that ye've done for Finley, it's only proper that we do somethin' for ye, too. I dinna ken how ye managed to change him so much, but ye have. He's a different man noo, Etna."

Etna's cheeks heated, a furious blush spreading over her face within moments. She wondered if Lochlan knew what had happened between her and Finley, but she didn't dare ask anything that could confirm her suspicions. She could only hope that Finley hadn't told his brother about the night that they had shared, as then it would be impossible for her to even look at him in the eyes.

"He's with Malina noo, ye ken," she told Lochlan, quickly trying to divert the subject elsewhere. Lochlan seemed surprised by that, eyes comically wide.

"Are ye serious?" he asked. "How did ye get him to do that? I've been tellin' him for years that he should be more involved, but ye ken how he is . . . he never listened to me."

"Forgive me for bein' blunt, but the Laird doesna listen to anyone," Etna said, drawing a laugh out of Lochlan.

"It's the truth," he said with a small shrug. "But ye managed to convince him. He listens to ye."

“Only rarely,” Etna said. “But he seems verra happy to see her again. And Malina seems happy, too.”

“I’m glad,” Lochlan said. “Perhaps it would be a good time noo to tell him about . . . weel, about that thing I was tellin’ ye.”

After everything that had happened in the past few days, Etna had completely forgotten about Lochlan’s plan to ask Finley’s permission to marry Mairi. Now that she knew that Finley wasn’t the kind of man that others painted him as, though, she didn’t worry as much.

But that doesna mean that he’ll approve of their marriage.

If she had learned anything about Finley when she knew him, it was that he was a stubborn man, and he liked tradition. He didn’t strike her as particularly flexible when it came to such matters, and it wouldn’t surprise her to hear that he wouldn’t allow that marriage.

But there’s na harm in tryin’.

“As long as ye dinna upset him,” she told Lochlan. “It was hard enough to get him where he is. We dinna want him to get worse noo that he’s changin’ for the better.”

With a sigh, Lochlan scratched the back of his head in thought. “I suppose ye’re right,” he said. “Do ye really think that he willna like it?”

“I dinna ken, Lochlan,” Etna said, deciding that telling him the truth was perhaps for the best. “I wish I could say for certain, but I canna. I can only wish ye luck. Try to talk to him when he seems happy. That might help.”

“Ach, he always seems happy noo,” Lochlan said. “Weel . . . I suppose we’ll see. Perhaps yer faither can help me with it.”

As Lochlan all but skipped away, as though the mere thought of Mairi put a spring to his step, Etna wondered if perhaps she should

be the one to prepare Finley for what Lochlan wanted to ask him. After all, he did seem to listen to her, and after the night they had spent together, the two of them had gotten much closer.

But the last thing that Etna wanted was Finley to be angry at her, so she decided that the best course of action was to keep her lips sealed.

Glancing back at the letter in her hands, every thought of Lochlan and Mairi left Etna's mind, and the only thing that was left behind was her excitement to see her father once more. Surely, she thought, he would already be on his way, and it wouldn't be long until he arrived.

I only need to ensure that he doesn't find out about me and Finley.

Her father didn't need to know. In fact, no one needed to know. Whatever was blossoming between them was still too recent—and too precious—to share it with others. But despite her desire to keep it a secret, she didn't think that she and Finley were doing a good job at hiding it. She had caught Finley's lingering gaze on her more than once, and she knew that she must have been looking at him the same way. She was just bracing herself for the inevitable moment when everyone in the castle would find out that they were involved.

But would that be so bad? Finley hasna had a woman for years.

Surely, no one would judge him for it.

But she would be the one to be judged. The people would look down on her for it, and she wouldn't be able to bear the humiliation that would come with it. It was better to keep everything between them a secret, as difficult as that would be.

Chapter Nineteen

Finley's order to the servants to uncover the windows and let the sunlight pour into the castle was met with a lot of whispering and rumors from everyone, clansmen and women and servants alike. They were all surprised to see the castle so bright after years of darkness, and understandably so, but none of them dared to say anything to Finley.

They still feared him, which was something that he had to fix. He wanted his people's respect, not their fear, and he was only then beginning to see that he could only change their minds about him by showing them that he, too, had changed.

But that would have to wait. Before he could do anything to change people's perception of him, he had to deal with the threat of the brigands.

In the days since the attack, the brigands had been the one thing that hadn't left Finley's mind for even one moment. The threat was constant, and so he couldn't afford to be distracted for a single second. Even when he was with Malina, a part of his mind was still occupied by the brigands. And now, sitting in his study with Lochlan across from him, more silent than the man had ever been, it was the only thing that he could think about.

What if they attack again? What happens when I'm not there?

The last time, he had barely survived, and most of his men had been injured, too. The villagers would stand no chance against the brigands on their own, with no one to defend them.

He couldn't wait for the brigands to attack again. That would only put the villagers at risk, and there was no guarantee that he could catch them. No, he had to actively fight them.

He was certain that there was a traitor among them, who gave the brigands all the information they needed. As much as he hated to think that one of his men could have betrayed him, it was the most logical conclusion and one that he had reached a long time ago. But now, it was time for him to find that traitor. He had let him wreak havoc in his clan for much too long.

“We have information regarding the location of the brigands,” Lochlan said, getting comfortable in his seat. “The spies gave us word that they’re in hidin’, and they say that they’ve found the place.”

It was good news, better than any news Finley had heard in a while. The brigands had evaded them for too long, but now that they had found their hideout, Finley allowed himself to think that perhaps they could finally defeat them.

“And the information has been confirmed?” he asked.

“As confirmed as it can be,” Lochlan said. “But two of our spies say that they saw some of the men with their own eyes, so I trust them. They have na reason to lie.”

Finley wasn’t so certain about that. Who would be better at giving the brigands information than one of their own spies? That was precisely what they were trained for. Finley stayed quiet for a few moments, his gaze jumping back and forth between his brother and the stacks of papers on his desk.

“There must be a traitor, Lochlan,” he told his brother in the end, a heavy sigh escaping his lips. “I ken that ye dinna even want to hear it but—”

“Ye’re right,” Lochlan said, interrupting him. “I didna wish to hear it, but ye were always right. How else would they ken when to attack the village? I’ve been thinkin’ about the verra same thing since it happened, and I canna wrap me head around it all.”

“Aye,” Finley said. “Someone must have informed them that we

would be there. They had na other reason to attack when they did.”

“That’s what I thought,” Lochlan said, confirming Finley’s theory. “But I dinna understand . . . who would do such a thing? I ken these men better than anyone. I canna suspect any of them.”

“Weel . . . it’s time that ye do,” Finley said. He knew that it must have been hard for Lochlan to turn against any of those men since he had been working so closely with them for years, but he needed to know that his brother would be on his side, no matter which one of the men turned out to be the traitor.

“I dinna ken what to tell ye, Finley,” Lochlan said, a hand coming up to brush through his hair. “I honestly canna think of anyone who would betray us. We’ve kent those men since we were all bairns. We both ken them. Can ye suspect anyone? I certainly canna.”

“Perhaps one of the younger ones,” Finley suggested. “Surely, ye dinna ken as much about them as ye do about those who grew up with us. Do ye think it could be one of them?”

Lochlan hesitated, drawing his bottom lip between his teeth. “Perhaps,” he said in the end, as he let his hand fall by his side. “There’s na tellin’ who it may be. What do ye want me to do? Should I begin an investigation?”

“Na,” Finley said with a shake of his head. “Na, that willna do anythin’ for morale, and we need as much of it as we can get. We must be discreet about this. We canna let the men ken that we suspect any of them.”

“That willna be easy,” Lochlan said. “Ye ken how it is with the lads. They’re worse than the servant lasses when it comes to rumors. If one of them finds out, then they’ll all ken.”

For a few moments, Finley was silent, contemplating his options. He knew that he couldn’t be direct about it, that he couldn’t approach each and every one of those men and accuse them of being a traitor, not only because he didn’t want to offend any of them, but also

because he didn't want the traitor to know that he was aware of his existence. He had to be subtle to find out who was responsible without alerting anyone to his suspicions.

"We'll set up a trap," Finley said after a while, deciding that it was the best they could do under the circumstances. "It isnae the most honest thing to do, and perhaps some of the men will be angry afterward, but it's the only thing that will work at this point."

"A trap?" Lochlan asked. "What kind of trap?"

"We ken where they are, correct?" Finley asked though he expected no answer. "So, we'll tell the men that we will attack. And so, we will. But we'll give the men a fake plan. Say we tell them we'll camp here," he said, pointing with his finger on the map that was spread over his desk. "And attack from the east. If one of the men informs the brigands, we'll ken. We'll attack from the south with one group and set up a trap with another. The traitor will lead them straight to the trap."

For a few moments, Lochlan remained silent, deep in thought as he considered Finley's plan. "Do ye think that we have enough men for this?" he asked. "Ye hardly trust any of them. Who are we supposed to tell noo?"

"Only those that we trust," Finley said. "I trust yer judgment, Lochlan. I'm only askin' ye to keep yer personal feelings out of the way. It could be someone ye think of as a friend, so please, be careful with whom ye share this plan."

Lochlan gave Finley a slow nod. "Of course," he said. "Dinna worry. There are some men that I trust implicitly, and they're the only ones who will ken. Na one else will hear about this plan, I promise ye."

"We must do this soon," Finley said. Not only did he want to defeat the brigands as soon as possible, but he also wanted to minimize any chances of the plan leaking to people who shouldn't know about it.

“How soon?” Lochlan asked.

“We should leave the morrow at first light,” Finley said.

“So soon?”

“It’s better that way. Do ye think that ye can prepare the men in such a short time?”

Lochlan snorted at that, as though the mere thought that his men weren’t already prepared was ridiculous. “Of course,” he said. “But dinna ye think that ye should rest more?”

Finley shook his head. Even though his wounds still ached when he moved, he couldn’t afford to wait any longer. Besides, he was getting restless, spending so much time in a bed, and he wanted nothing more than to be back to normal.

“I canna rest anymore,” he told his brother. “I’ve rested enough. I’m fine, and the men can fight, can they na?”

“They can,” Lochlan confirmed. “But we could delay it for a few days.”

“Na,” Finley said. “We leave the morrow.”

“Verra weel.” With that, Lochlan stood from his chair, heading to the door. “I’ll make sure that everythin’ is prepared, then.”

“Thank ye, Lochlan.”

Once his brother was gone, Finley was plunged one more into his thoughts. He hoped that he had made the right choice, but there would be no way to know until they would actually come face to face with the brigands.

But he was determined to defeat them no matter what. Now that they knew their location, they couldn’t evade his forces for much

longer.

With a sigh, Finley stood and headed out of his study. It was still early, and so a part of him was reluctant to seek out Etna, as they hadn't even put a name to whatever it was that was going on between them, and so he didn't want anyone else to know. But he would be leaving the following morning, and he wanted to see her, speak to her and say goodbye before he left.

As he walked through the castle corridors, he couldn't help but notice that the servants were in a brighter mood than he had seen them in a long time—at least until they noticed him. The moment that their gazes fell on him, their smiles fell, and they halted every conversation.

Finley didn't address it. Eventually, they would begin to smile around him once more, he thought.

He searched for Etna for a while, thinking that perhaps he would manage to stumble into her and not raise any suspicions, but she was nowhere to be found. And so, Finley made his way to her chambers, looking left and right before he knocked on her door to ensure that there was no one around.

The door opened within moments, and when Finley saw Etna, a smile formed on his lips.

"Me Laird," she said, giving him a small bow, and he could see from the way that her own gaze flitted around the corridor that she was just as cautious as him. "What can I do for ye?"

Without a word, Finley pushed his way inside the room, closing the door behind him.

"I came to see ye," he said, taking her hand in his own and bringing it to his lips to press a kiss on her knuckles. "I wanted to tell ye that I will be leavin' at first light."

The news came as a shock to Etna, who looked at him with wide, fearful eyes. "Where are ye goin'?" she asked. "Finley, ye're still recoverin'! It's na a good idea to go anywhere right noo."

"Ach, I'll be fine, lass," Finley assured her, waving a hand dismissively. "Dinna fash yerself. I'm healed, me men are healed, we'll be fine."

"So ye're goin' to battle?" she asked. "So soon after what happened?"

"Aye," Finley said. "We must strike as soon as we can. We received information regarding the brigands' location. I'm takin' me men there the morrow."

"But Finley . . ." Etna's hand came to rest on his shoulder. "After last time . . . what if ye end up dead? What will happen to Malina?"

"I willna," Finley promised. Of course, there was always a chance that he would, in fact, end up dead, but he didn't want to think about it, not when he was so close to catching the brigands and exposing the traitor. Fear would do him no good, and the only thing that brought him any actual fear was the thought that his death would leave Malina without any parents. "Trust me, lass. I have a plan. It's a verra good plan. We'll be back before ye even notice that we are gone."

"I verra much doubt that," Etna said, but she didn't press the matter any further. "Is that what ye came here to tell me?"

"Aye," Finley said. "And weel . . . I didna only wish to speak with ye."

As he spoke, Finley grabbed Etna by the waist, pulling her closer to him. For a moment, he simply gazed at her, enraptured by how beautiful she was. Then, he pressed a soft kiss onto her lips, one that she eagerly returned.

"I see," Etna said, her voice teasing as her own hands came to rest on his shoulders. "And what else did ye come here for, then?"

Finley was well aware that Etna knew precisely why he had gone to her room, and so he didn't reply to her. Instead, he began to kiss her jaw and neck, sucking on the sensitive skin below her ear just to hear one of those breathy moans that he loved so much. It took only moments for Etna to become pliant in his arms, sighing and moaning against him as he kissed his way around her neck, dipping lower and lower until his teeth grazed the mounds of her breasts.

His trews were getting tighter with every passing moment, his member hardening at the feel of Etna's body under his hands. When Etna let her fingers slide down his body, finding their way to his hardness, he took a sharp breath, knees almost buckling under his weight.

He wanted her, and he wanted her right then and there.

Finley captured Etna's lips in a kiss once more as his hands fumbled with her dress. "Ye dinna ken what ye do to me," he said, and his voice was already rough with lust, hoarse as though he hadn't used it in days. He spun her around, hands all but tearing the laces off her corset as he tried to get her naked, letting each piece of garment fall on the floor by their feet.

It wasn't long before Finley had her breasts freed from the confines of her dress, and he stopped undressing her, content to simply push her against the nearest wall, his lips wrapping tightly around a pebbled nipple. Etna moaned above him, her hand grabbing a fistful of his hair as he nibbled on her flesh.

"Finley . . ." she whispered, sounding just as far gone as he felt. "Please, Finley, I want ye."

Etna's hands pawed at his clothes, trying to get him to undress, too. His shirt soon joined the rest of the garments on the floor, and immediately, Etna's hands were on his skin, burning like fire.

“Let me,” she whispered, her hand dipping to his hardness once more. Only this time, she wasn’t content with touching him over his trews. Instead, she pushed them down to his knees before falling to her own, lips hovering over his manhood.

Finley groaned at the sight of her like that. He was flooded with sensations, Etna’s fingers and lips enveloping him and coaxing sounds out of him that he never knew he could make. He sounded primal, animalistic even to his own ears as he tried to keep his hips still, letting Etna take control.

Her mouth was liquid heat around him, and when Finley looked at her, Etna met his gaze. He loved looking at her, loved seeing her so open and so lost in her own pleasure, and he wanted nothing more than to make her shake and tremble with his own ministrations.

With a gentle hand, Finley pulled Etna up to her feet, crashing their mouths together. He quickly got rid of the rest of her clothes, throwing them aside with not a care, before he pinned her chest-first to the wall, molding his body against her back.

“You may wish to try and remain quiet,” he whispered in her ear. “But I’ll do me best to make ye scream.”

Chapter Twenty

Those words left Etna a moaning, shivering mess against the wall. She could still taste Finley on her tongue, and she could feel him everywhere, on every inch of her skin, a hard, solid mass behind her. Pushing her hips back, she felt his manhood against her thigh, and she wanted nothing more than to feel him inside of her.

But Finley seemed to have different ideas.

He fell onto his knees, too, tongue darting out to taste her as his hands pulled her hips even further back, spreading her legs apart. Etna let her forehead rest against the wall, her breath coming out in short bursts as she held herself up on her tiptoes, hands scrambling to find something to hold onto.

Finley was relentless, hands roaming all over her body as he pleased her. Heat and desire pooled deep inside Etna, and she brought her hand to her mouth, biting down to stop herself from screaming.

The last thing that she wanted was for someone to hear them, and Finley was making good on his promise to do his best to make her scream.

The sensations were almost unbearable, Etna's entire body heating up under Finley's attentions. She pushed her hips back, chasing her pleasure, and Finley was quick to reply with a warning growl, hands flying to her hips to hold her in place.

Etna loved him like that, so eager and dominant, and she craved the way that he held her still, taking control. She couldn't help but shudder at the thought of being held still and claimed, and in her eagerness for Finley to take her to bed, she let out a soft whine of complaint.

“Please, Finley,” she said. “Dinna tease me any longer.”

Finley stood behind her, and Etna was ready to follow him to the bed, but instead, he pressed her even harder against the wall, kissing the back of her neck.

“Tell me what ye want,” he whispered in her ear. “I’ll give ye anythin’.”

“I want ye,” Etna said. “I want ye to make me yers.”

Finley groaned at that, one hand moving to her breast as the other snaked between her legs, finding that spot that had her whimpering within moments. He teased her with his fingers, two of them slipping easily in her wetness, and Etna could do little other than take everything Finley was giving her.

When Etna finally felt his manhood against her, she let her eyes slip shut, biting down on her hand in preparation for what was to come. Finley held her still as he entered her, his hips moving torturously slow and his hands digging into the flesh of her hips.

It was all that Etna wanted at that moment, to be consumed by that man, to be claimed in every way that mattered. She had never felt anything like it before, like that sense of completeness that she felt in that very moment, and she wanted to make it last, though she knew it wouldn’t be long until she would reach her climax.

Finley’s lips were a branding iron on her skin as he kissed her neck and her shoulders. It seemed to Etna as though he had made it his sole purpose to drive her crazy with his slow thrusts and his light, feathery kisses, and so she reached behind her, grabbing a firm thigh and trying to pull him closer, deeper.

Finley laughed in her ear, a sound that had her knees wobbling. “Dinna be impatient,” he said. “We have all night ahead of us.”

Etna wondered momentarily if Finley planned on making love to

her all night long since it was still early in the evening, but all thoughts vanished from her head at his next thrust. It was nothing but torment, the slow, sensual roll of his hips leaving her wanting more and never getting enough.

“Ye’re so bonnie, Etna,” Finley said, the mere sound of his voice sending jolts of pleasure down her spine. Finley knew how to pleasure a woman, she thought, but she didn’t know how much pleasure she could take before it all became too much. “Look at ye . . . so verra bonnie.”

Etna tried to crane her neck, tilting her head to the side to kiss Finley, but she couldn’t reach his lips. Finley then spun her around, and Etna let out a whine of protest at the sudden loss of heat against her before Finley pressed her back up on the wall. Now that they were facing each other, Etna could see the hunger in his eyes, his gaze boring into her and leaving her feeling vulnerable.

Finley grabbed her thigh with a strong hand and made Etna wrap her leg around his hip before he entered her once more. Etna wrapped her arms around his neck, finally kissing him like she wanted to, drinking every delicious sound he made. Finley kissed her back with as much fervor and passion, and Etna melted against him, drunk with desire.

With every thrust of his hips, Finley pushed Etna higher and higher until his hands were all that was holding her against the wall, and her toes dangled right above the ground. Etna wrapped her other leg around Finley’s waist, as well, letting him in even deeper inside her, every thrust hitting a sweet spot that had her seeing stars. She let her head fall back and closed her eyes tightly, lust rippling through her.

“Na,” Finley all but growled. “Look at me, Etna. I want to see ye.”

Etna did as she was told, opening her eyes once more and looking at Finley. His gaze never left her own until he crashed their lips together, stealing another kiss from her.

Sensation after sensation exploded within Etna, and her legs began to shake where they were wrapped around Finley. She could feel the now-familiar pressure building up deep inside her, and she held onto him even tighter, clinging onto him with every ounce of strength that she had left.

With a low, wanton moan of Finley's name, Etna reached her climax, the sensations overwhelming. She panted against him, his relentless thrusts taking her breath away and torturing her sensitive flesh in the best way, but Finley gave her no time to recover before he carried her to her bed, sitting on the edge of the mattress with Etna in his lap, his hands guiding her to move her hips.

Etna thought that there was no way she could survive their encounter. Every inch of her body responded instantly to Finley's touch, part of her wanting more and part of her wanting to withdraw from him as her pleasure teetered on too much. But when she looked at Finley, she saw that same ravenous gaze, and it was enough to make her want more again.

Finley kissed her before lying back onto the mattress, letting Etna move as she wished. His hands found her breasts, cupping them as they swung with every roll of her hips, and Etna planted her own hands on his chest, using him as leverage to move her body.

Finley's chest was so firm under her hands, muscles flexing under her fingers. Etna couldn't stop looking at the expanse of his torso, at his eyes, at that small smile that spread over his lips every time he looked at her while they were joined like that, and the mere sight of it all made her chest a little tight. She wanted to look at him forever, to feel that very same pleasure of that moment forever, to have him under her and coax her name out of his lips again and again.

Unlike her, though Finley was quiet, he wasn't silent. His soft moans and breathless sighs let her know that he was enjoying it as much as she was, and it spurred her on, making her move her hips faster. She watched as Finley threw his head back, a groan rumbling through his chest, and suddenly, she could feel the stirrings of

another climax deep inside her.

How does this man do this to me? Does this feeling ever stop?

Etna hoped that the answer to her question was a negative one. She never wanted it to stop.

When she reached her zenith once more, she cried out Finley's name before she could stop herself, her own orgasm taking her by surprise. Then, it was as though that was what Finley had been expecting. With a few more thrusts of his hips as Etna tried to regain her composure, he joined her, spilling himself inside of her with her name on his lips.

Etna panted above him for a few moments before she collapsed onto his chest, a breathless laugh escaping her. She was happy, happier than she had been in a while, and she hoped that Finley was happy, too.

Her thighs were sore from the exertion as she moved off his lap, but Etna didn't care. If anything, the burn on her thighs in the following days would only be a reminder of what they had shared, a secret that was bound to make her blush every time she thought about it.

Finley's hands never let her body as she moved, one of them laying possessively over her hip. He kissed her, and then he let his fingers trail up her body until his hand cupped her cheek, a thumb rubbing small circles over her skin.

"Do ye have to leave the morrow?" Etna asked, voice quiet in the silence of the room. "Are ye certain that ye'll be alright?"

"Weel, I didna have any trouble with this," Finley said with a small shrug and a smug smile on his face. Etna rolled her eyes at him, a hand punching him gently on the shoulder. "I'll be fine, Etna. I promise ye. If I didna think I could do it, I wouldna do it."

Etna knew that was a blatant lie, one that Finley only said to

reassure her, but she didn't point that out. Instead, she snuggled closer to him, content to feel the warmth of his skin.

"Will ye stay with me?" Etna asked. "Tonight?"

It was a risky thing to do, she knew since they could be found out, but that was the last thing on her mind. All she knew was that she wanted to spend every waking and sleeping moment with him, especially since she didn't know what the following day would bring. Finley acted very confident, but he could be wounded again or worse. Etna didn't want to miss a single moment with him.

Finley hesitated at her question, contemplating his answer for a moment before he nodded in agreement. "Aye," he said. "I'll stay. But I'll have to leave verra early. I dinna wish to wake ye."

"I dinna mind," Etna assured him. "I just . . . I just want ye to stay."

Etna hated how needy she sounded even to her own ears. She didn't want Finley to think that she was clinging onto him, that she always wanted him by her side—even though that was precisely what she wanted—thinking that perhaps that would scare him off. It wasn't so long ago, after all, that he had sworn off women for the rest of his life, and now the two of them were sleeping together.

But Finley didn't show any signs of withdrawing from her. He didn't seem to be scared off by her request. If anything, his arms tightened around Etna, and he scattered kiss after kiss all over her face. It made Etna giggle, the sound high and bright, and she captured his lips in a soft, languid kiss.

As intoxicating as their hurried, passionate kisses were, Etna loved those quiet moments when they could lose themselves in each other with no hurry.

It didn't take long after that for them to fall asleep in each other's arms. Etna slept soundly next to Finley, never letting go of him, and when she awoke, she found him already stirring.

The sun was barely peeking through the horizon, the morning light casting a faint blue glow in the room. Etna looked at Finley as he blinked his eyes open, and when he saw her, he gave her a big, happy smile.

“Good mornin’,” he said, quickly stealing a kiss.

“Good mornin’,” Etna told him, just as Finley sat up. But before he could get too far, Etna grabbed him and pulled him back down, much to Finley’s amusement.

“I told ye that I would have to leave early,” he said. “I must go, Etna. But I promise ye, it willna be long until I come back.”

With a sigh, Etna let Finley go and watched him as he began to dress. “Be careful,” she said. “That’s all I’m askin’. And come back to me.”

“Dinna fash yerself, lass,” Finley said, but Etna had heard him say that very same thing so many times that it meant nothing to her anymore. She always worried, no matter how much Finley told her not to.

When Finley was dressed, he crawled back into Etna’s bed, his body hovering over hers. Etna pulled him closer, wrapping her legs around his waist, hoping to entice him into staying a little longer. Finley smiled against her lips, a hand moving to her thigh.

“Dinna ye have any time?” Etna asked. “At all?”

Finley groaned in response. Etna could feel his manhood harden through his trews, but still, his resolve wouldn’t crumble.

“I must go,” he said, and as he spoke, his hand moved from her thigh, slipping between her legs and teasing her opening. Etna’s legs fell open, and she pushed her hips toward him, chasing her pleasure. “But when I return, I willna let ye out of this bed for an entire day. That’s a promise.”

As fast as that hand had slipped between her legs, it disappeared. Finley hopped off the bed, grabbed his shoes, and put them on hastily before heading to the door.

“I’ll be waitin’,” Etna said. She could feel the heat of a flush over her face and her chest, Finley’s teasing frustrating her to no end. When he left the room, she let her head fall back onto the pillow with a groan, her flesh tingling where Finley had touched her.

He better be back soon. I want him again already.

Chapter Twenty-One

Since Finley's departure that morning, Etna had been trying to focus on her classes with Malina, but she found it difficult, her mind providing her with scenarios of everything that could go wrong. She was only partly paying attention when she heard an approaching carriage, the sound drawing her gaze out of the window. For a moment, she paid no mind to it—it was hardly uncommon to see a carriage there—but then she saw the man who stepped out of it, and her heart stopped in her chest.

Faither!

"Look, Malina," he told the little girl as she pointed out of the window. "Do ye wish to come with me and greet me faither?"

Malina nodded, grabbing Etna's hand as the two of them rushed out of the castle, Etna only coming to a stop when she was right in front of her father.

"Etna!" Dougal exclaimed just as Etna pulled him into a tight hug, holding him tightly. She couldn't help but notice that he looked thinner, frailer than usual, and it infuriated her.

"Faither, have ye na been eatin'?" she asked. If she had known that a grown man like him couldn't take care of himself, she would have never left the village. "Ye're thin as a stick!"

"Dinna fash yerself, lass," Dougal said. "I'm na an old man, na yet, and I can take care of meself. Ye just like to worry."

As he spoke, Dougal's gaze fell onto Malina, and he gave her a deep bow, one that had Malina giggling. "And this must be the wee lassie," Dougal said. "It's verra nice to meet ye, Malina."

Though Malina didn't speak, her cheeks red from all the attention, she returned Dougal's bow, making him and Etna laugh.

"Weel . . . where is the Laird?" Dougal asked. "I would think that he would come greet me."

"He's na here, Faither," Etna told him. She wished that they could have known that her father would be there that morning. Perhaps she could have convinced Finley to delay his attack, knowing how much he and Lochlan liked her father. "He and Lochlan, they both left early this mornin'."

"Do ye ken when they'll return?"

Etna shook her head. She could only hope that it would be soon and that it wouldn't be like the last time when Finley had almost died.

"Come," Etna said, quickly changing the subject. "Finley and Lochlan may na be here, but I ken that there is someone else who would love to see ye."

With that, Etna led her father to the drawing-room, knocking gently on the door before entering the room, with Malina still in tow. As she had expected, she found Arlene there, sipping on her tea.

When Arlene saw Dougal, she beamed at him, hurrying to stand and greet him. "Dougal, how nice to have ye here, finally," she said, grasping both of his shoulders as a greeting. "Ye're getting' old."

"I canna say the same for ye," Dougal said with his usual, charming smile.

"Ach, Dougal . . . there is na reason to lie to me," Arlene said, and after that, the two of them sat down, and Etna decided to leave them alone for a while to catch up. As she left the room with Malina, the little girl looked up at her, beaming.

"I like yer papa," she said. "He's nice."

Etna didn't know how her father managed to make every child like him after only interacting with them for a few seconds, but what she did know was that she envied that ability. If only Malina had liked her as much when they had first met, it would have made everything easier.

After she finished her lessons for the day with Malina, Etna sought out her father, and she found him strolling around the gardens. Etna fell into step next to him, laughing when her presence startled him.

"It's nice to be back," her father said. "Do ye enjoy it here? Be honest."

"More than I did when I first came here," Etna said, though the truth was that she enjoyed it very much for several different reasons. Part of it was the joy of teaching Malina, and another part was Finley and the relationship that had blossomed between them, but she would never tell her father about the latter. "I can see why ye enjoy teachin'. Malina is a verra bright bairn, and just seein' her grow makes everythin' else worth it."

"So, ye dinna hate this place anymore?" her father asked, and Etna shook her head.

"Na. Na, I dinna."

Dougal stopped walking and turned around to face Etna. "I was offered a job in Edinburgh," he said. "They want me to teach there."

Etna gasped, the news bringing a smile to her face. "That's wonderful news!" she said. "Ye'll take the job, of course?"

"Aye, I will," her father confirmed. "I fear that I may na be as good as I used to—"

"Nonsense," Etna interrupted. "I havena met a better tutor than ye,

Faither.”

“Weel, ye might surpass me sooner than ye think,” he said. “But I wanted to ask ye . . . do ye wish to come with me? I ken that ye didna want to come here in the first place, and how much ye love Edinburgh. Ye dinna have to stay here anymore. I’ll speak with Arlene. I’m sure she’ll understand.”

Edinburgh. It’s all I ever wanted.

How many times had Etna wished that she could go back home? How many times had she cried herself to sleep in that castle, wishing that she was anywhere but there? For as long as she could remember, she wanted nothing more than to find an opportunity to move back to Edinburgh, and she had always been determined to do whatever it took.

And now her father had taken a job there and moving back sounded easier than ever. She didn’t even have to go through with the bargain that she had struck with Finley. She could leave with her father and never look back.

But how could she? The excitement that she thought she would feel upon having the opportunity to return to Edinburgh never came. Her heart didn’t beat faster in her chest. Her stomach didn’t turn itself into a knot. Her thoughts revolved around staying rather than leaving, and her own reaction surprised her as much as it confused her.

She didn’t want to leave Malina and Finley, that much she knew for certain.

“Are ye happy?” her father asked, pulling Etna out of her thoughts.

She didn’t know what to say to him. If he had told her about it only a few weeks prior, Etna would have jumped at the chance to go back to Edinburgh. Under any other circumstances, she would already be packing her things, eager to leave. But now, she could only smile and nod as she tried to subdue the panic that welled up

inside her.

There was no telling how her relationship with Finley would evolve, and Etna knew as much. She didn't expect him to suddenly fall madly in love with her, nor did she expect herself to do the same. Perhaps one day—a day that could come sooner than she thought—she would be ready to go to Edinburgh, and everything she had with Finley would be nothing more than a pleasant memory.

But it wasn't just her desire for him that held her back. She couldn't leave him while he struggled with his clan, and she couldn't leave Malina while she was reconnecting with her father. Her job there wasn't done yet.

How will I tell him that I canna go?

She was certain that the main reason why her father had accepted the position in the first place was because of her so that she could go back to Edinburgh. Her father had never minded living in the village. If anything, he enjoyed it, and Etna hated to think that he would make such a big change in his life just for her when she couldn't bring herself to leave Finley and Malina.

“Do ye ken when ye'll be goin' to Edinburgh?” she asked him, hoping that it wouldn't be too soon.

“As soon as possible,” her father said. “I have already secured a house, and I ken that ye'll love it. It has a lovely room for ye, and a study that will be big enough for both of us.”

Her father's consideration only served to make Etna feel worse for not wanting to join him in Edinburgh. It had been all that she could talk about, nagging him for years to find a way to return, and now that he had found it, she was so ungrateful.

What will he think when I tell him I canna go?

Etna knew her father well, and so she didn't think that he would be upset with her. But he was bound to be disappointed, and Etna couldn't bear to think that she would be the source of that disappointment.

Perhaps I should tell him noo.

But as much as she tried, the words would simply not move past her lips. Every time she glanced at her father, she lost her nerve, and in the end, she gave up. She would just have to tell him at the end of his visit, right before he would leave, as that seemed like the easiest option to her.

We canna spend hours talkin' about it if he's on his way home.

"Ye dinna seem verra excited," her father said, perceptive as always, but Etna was quick to smile and shake her head.

"It's all sudden, that's all," she said. "But I am, Faither. And I'm verra happy that ye're here. Do ye ken how long ye'll be stayin'?"

"A few weeks, at least, I expect," her father said. "Arlene's invitation made it clear that I am na to leave until I've had me fill of the place."

"Is it like ye remember?" Etna asked.

"Aye, it is," her father said. "I thought that I would be walkin' into a dungeon by yer descriptions of the place, but na much has changed. Why do ye hate it so much here? What dinna ye like about the place?"

Etna looked around them, drawing her bottom lip between her teeth as she observed the servants and the clansmen and women who went about their days around them. A lot had changed just in the past two weeks, and the castle was a different place than the one she had originally seen.

"It wasna like this," she said. "Na when I came here. This is a verra recent development."

"What do ye mean?"

"I mean that the Laird wouldna allow anyone to even smile or talk, especially in his presence. He had all the windows boarded up, and he wouldna allow any feasts, any dancin' or singin'."

Her father hummed at that, his own gaze flitting around the courtyard. "That doesna seem to be the case, noo."

"Na," Etna confirmed. "But only because the Laird is a changed man. Na one could believe it at first, but it's been two or so weeks since it happened."

"I wonder what made him change," her father said, and Etna averted her gaze, hoping that he wouldn't notice how her cheeks heated and reddened at the question.

"It must have been the victory against the brigands," Etna said, trying to cover up the real reason for Finley's change, even though her father couldn't possibly have guessed that it was all because of the night they had shared. "The clan has been havin' a serious problem with them, and for the first time, they managed to defeat them in an attack. But many of the men were wounded, even the Laird. I suppose his brush with death gave him a new perspective."

"He wouldna be the first man to change after that," her father said. "Weel, as long as he changed for the better. I only wish I could have seen him and Lochlan before they left."

"They were both verra excited to see ye," Etna said. "But they're bound to come back soon. And since ye're stayin' for so long, I'm sure ye'll get to see them."

"I mainly want to see ye, *mo nighean*," her father said as he took her hand in his, giving it a gentle squeeze. "The house is empty without

ye. But I suppose that willna be an issue in Edinburgh. Ye always had a way of fillin' up the house. I'm certain that yer friends will be verra happy to have ye back, and they'll be visitin' us all the time."

Etna felt a knot block her throat at that, and she tried to swallow it as she plastered a smile onto her lips. Her father sounded so happy when he spoke those words, and Etna was instantly overcome with guilt, the corner of her lips trembling as she smiled.

I'm sorry, Faither. I'm so verra sorry.

Her lies and her half-truths were the last things that her father deserved. She had never lied to him before, not even about little things, and lying to him now seemed monumental, an action much worse than she could have ever imagined.

But a half-truth was better than the disappointment of the whole truth.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Having her father there was better than Etna could have ever imagined. Not only had she missed him, and his presence was a welcome change, but his visit also gave her the chance to watch him teach.

Though her father had taught her everything she knew, she had never been there when he was teaching another child. Now that Etna had followed in his footsteps watching him with Malina was the greatest lesson she could ever receive from him. It was like learning from a master, and she made sure to make a mental note of everything that he did.

And though she had seen him around children many times, Etna had never realized just how good he was at interacting with them, perhaps because back then, she had been a child, too. Now, as a grown woman, she watched him play and run around with Malina with an energy that never seemed to exhaust itself—which was impressive in itself, considering his age—and she could see that Malina already adored him.

“How do ye do that?” she asked her father, once he and Malina had settled down, and she was reading the pages Dougal had instructed her to read. “How are ye so good with her? She absolutely hated me when I first came here.”

“Aye, that may be the case, but she loves ye noo,” Dougal said. “Ye only have to realize that a bairn is just a person. A wee person who likes to run and break things, but a person nevertheless.”

Etna laughed at that, shaking her head at her father. “Was I like that, too?”

“Och, aye,” her father said. “If anythin’, ye were worse. There was

na bringin' ye home if ye were out playin'. Ye were covered in mud all the time, too. Yer maither . . . she would get so angry at me for lettin' ye get dirty. But ye liked it so much, I didna have the heart to stop ye."

Every time her father spoke about her mother, his tone softened, and his gaze seemed faraway, as though he lost himself in the memories. Etna had never seen a love like that between her parents, and she wanted the same for herself. She wished that she would be lucky enough one day to love and be loved like that.

Could I ever have that with Finley?

It was a strange thought. Finley was the first man with whom Etna had ever had anything even resembling a relationship, and she couldn't decipher her own feelings. All she knew was that she enjoyed spending time with him and couldn't leave him. She was drawn to him, almost bound to him by sympathy and respect that she had only recently discovered she held for him.

What does love feel like?

"How did ye ken that ye were in love with Mama?" Etna asked. She had never stopped calling her *Mama*, as though her death had forced her to linger in the past. "Ye married for love, did ye na?"

"Aye," her father said, and there was that distant look on his face again. Etna wondered if it was just as painful for him to talk about her mother if she should perhaps stop asking him those questions, but as sad as Etna herself got whenever she thought about her, her memory also brought a smile to her face. She wanted to remember her. It was the only way to keep a part of her alive.

"Ye ken, Etna," her father said with a small shrug. "When the time comes, ye always ken."

Weel, I sure ken nothin'!

But before Etna could ask anything else, her blood froze in her veins when she heard a scream from the courtyard. It was a shrill, heart-breaking scream, one that lingered in Etna's ears despite lasting only a few moments.

"Brigands?" she asked, exchanging a hasty glance with her father.

Na . . . na, it canna be. Finley was so certain that his attack would succeed. Did the brigands make it here?

"I dinna think so," her father said. "It doesna sound like there's an attack."

"Malina, stay here," Etna instructed, and the little girl, her eyes wide and fearful, nodded fervently. "Nothin' will happen to ye, I promise."

"But I'm scared," Malina said, her gaze stuck onto the window as she tried to look outside, into the courtyard. "Will ye stay here with me?"

Etna made Malina look at her, giving her a reassuring smile. "It's only scary noises," she said. "Faither and I will go and stop it, ye'll see. And then we'll be back before ye even ken that we're gone."

With a kiss on Malina's head, Etna rushed out of the library, Dougal following close behind. When they made it out into the courtyard, the first thing that Etna saw was Arlene, standing by the steps and clutching onto her chest, her face pale and her entire frame shaking.

The commotion in the courtyard made it difficult for Etna to see what had upset Arlene so terribly, and it took her a few moments to notice Finley making his way through the crowd. She had never seen him so angry before, his brow furrowed and his face stormy, flushed red from his fury.

And then she saw that he was dragging a man behind him, holding him by his shackles.

No, not a man.

Lochlan.

“Stop it!” Arlene shouted, just as Dougal grabbed her, steadying her on her feet. “Finley, stop it, right noo! Ye’re hurtin’ him!”

Arlene looked frail, as though she would faint at any moment, and Etna feared that her heart couldn’t take what she was seeing. Lochlan was stumbling behind Finley, trying to catch up with his relentless pace, his wrists and ankles bound with chains, as though he was not Finley’s brother but a common criminal.

Etna saw that Finley’s lip was split, dried blood caking his mouth when they came closer. Finley’s face was a mask of resolve, but Etna could see it crumble in the way that his jaw twitched, hands faltering for a moment when he tugged on the chains.

“What are ye doin’?” Etna shouted at Finley, rushing up to him and stepping in front of him to stop him. “What have ye done, Finley? What have ye done to Lochlan?”

Finley looked as though he hardly heard Etna, but at the mention of Lochlan’s name, he diverted his gaze to him, watching him with disgust for a moment before he spat on his face. With one last growl, he pushed him forward, and Lochlan lost his balance, falling to his knees in front of him.

“Etna, make him stop!” Arlene shouted. “Please! I canna handle this.”

Etna looked at Arlene, who had all but fainted in Dougal’s arms, her legs no longer supporting her.

“Finley, stop!” Etna demanded, grabbing his arm and trying to make him look at her. “What are ye doin’? This is Lochlan . . . it’s yer brother. And yer grandmaither, look . . . look what ye’re doin’ to her.”

Finley glanced at Arlene, and though his rage didn't subside even for a moment, he pulled himself away from Lochlan. Etna breathed a sigh of relief. Lochlan was far from being safe, but at least Finley wouldn't hurt him any further while their grandmother was right there, watching.

"What happened?" Etna asked, trying to get something, anything out of him. But Finley didn't respond to her. Instead, he remained quiet, fingers curling into fists as he watched him bow his head silently.

It seemed to Etna that she wouldn't get an answer from him, so she approached one of his men, asking him the same question. When the man hesitated, Etna asked another, determined to get an answer.

"It was Lochlan who gave the information to the brigands," the second man told her, albeit reluctantly. "When the Laird found out, he became furious. I have never . . . I've never seen . . ."

The man's voice trailed off, and Etna couldn't help but wonder just how furious Finley had been at his brother to render a warrior speechless. But Etna couldn't possibly believe that Lochlan had done such a thing.

Though she couldn't claim to know Lochlan as well as Finley, or all that well at all, she knew enough about him to be certain that he wouldn't betray Finley. If there was one person in the world apart from Malina who adored the man, it was Lochlan. Every time he spoke about Finley, his eyes shone, and his lips curled into a smile. Etna couldn't believe for a single second that he was responsible for all the attacks. She couldn't believe that he would do that to Finley.

"Finley," Etna tried again, laying her hand on his shoulder. "Are ye certain it was Lochlan? That doesna sound right, does it? Why would Lochlan do such a thing?"

"I dinna ken why he did it," Finley said, and his voice was a low growl, unlike anything Etna had heard from him before. He

sounded like a wild animal, ready to pounce at any moment. “Ye’ll have to ask him that. All I ken is that he did it, and I’ll kill him for it. And I’ll kill anyone else who helped the bastard.”

“Finley, ye canna be serious!” Etna said, her heart pounding in her chest at those words. “Ye’re na thinkin’ straight! Ye’re agitated, ye —”

“I ken what I’m doin’,” Finley said, and before Etna could say anything else, he nodded at his men, and two of them stepped forward, grabbing Lochlan by the arms and hoisting him up. “Take him to the dungeon,” he said, and his men obeyed, dragging Lochlan behind them.

“Finley, he’s wounded!” Etna said, just as Finley began to walk away, ignoring her. “Please! At least send the healer to him, I beg ye! He willna last the night if ye leave him there, in the cold. Let the healer look at his wounds.”

“Why do ye care so much about a traitor?” Finley asked, his head snapping around to look at Etna. “Do ye na ken what he’s done? He’s responsible for all the lives we’ve lost.”

With that, Finley disappeared into the castle, seemingly unwilling to hear another word from Etna.

But Etna couldn’t simply allow Finley to treat Lochlan in such a way. He would die in that dungeon, she knew, if they just left him there with no help, and she couldn’t allow that to happen.

And then there was Arlene, who looked as though she was about to expire, too. Etna rushed to her, helping her father pull her onto a bench and sitting down next to her, fanning some air at her face with her hand.

“Etna,” Arlene said, her hand weak as she rested it on top of her own. “Ye must stop him. Dinna let him kill Lochlan.”

"I willna," Etna promised, just as two servants helped Arlene to her feet and took her inside the castle, leaving the rest of the courtyard in shocked silence.

Etna didn't know what to say or what to do. She was frozen in place, her hands trembling after what she had seen, her stomach twisting at the thought that Lochlan could die by his own brother's hand.

"Faither, I must do somethin'," Etna said, standing from the bench but then not knowing where to go and lingering in that spot. "What . . . what can I do, I dinna ken—"

"Lass," Dougal said, his voice surprisingly calm after what they had witnessed. He pulled her back onto the bench, forcing her to sit down for a moment. "There is nothin' that ye can do."

Etna refused to believe that. There was always something that she could do, something that someone could do to fix a situation, and she refused to think that there was no way to stop Finley from making the biggest mistake of his life. Etna had no doubts that it would destroy him, especially if he would find out that Lochlan was innocent.

How could anyone live with that? How could Finley live with the burden of his brother's blood on his hands?

He had killed a person he loved once before, and it had almost been enough to ruin him and his clan, and that was done in self-defense. Killing Lochlan in cold blood was something that Finley would never manage to overcome, no matter what he thought in that moment of fury.

And then, of course, there was Lochlan, who didn't deserve such a fate.

"It's best to leave noo, lass," her father said, pulling Etna out of her thoughts. "There's nothin' that ye can do. It's better for both of us to leave and head to Edinburgh noo. There is na point in stayin'

here.”

“I willna leave, Faither,” Etna said, her voice steely with resolve. She wouldn’t abandon Lochlan, and she certainly wouldn’t abandon Finley. He needed her, too. He needed her to stop him, even if he didn’t know it.

“I think it’s best—”

“I willna leave,” Etna repeated, this time rising from her seat once more and crossing her arms over her chest. “I refuse to. Noo is hardly the time to be thinkin’ about Edinburgh, Faither. I must . . . I must speak to Arlene. I must find a way to stop all this, or Lochlan will end up dead, and it’ll be just as much on me own hands as on Finley’s.”

Her father raised his hands up in surrender, taking a step back with a sigh. Without saying another word, Etna rushed into the castle, deciding that it was best to find Arlene first and try to find a way to pull Finley out of his madness.

It’s one thing after another. When will it stop? Finley canna have a moment of peace.

As much as Etna thought that he was making a grave mistake, and as angry as she was at him for acting without having all the evidence—something that she took for granted, as she refused to believe that Lochlan was the real traitor—and for beating Lochlan into a bloody pulp, she couldn’t help but feel sorry for Finley. Life threw tragedy after tragedy at him, and he couldn’t get a break from it.

But what if . . . what if Lochlan is the traitor? What if Finley is right?

Etna had believed once that Finley was a murderer, and it turned out that she had judged him too quickly, without knowing all the facts. What if she was doing the same with Lochlan? What if she was letting his charming exterior and his apparent kindness to distract her from the truth?

She didn't want to make the same mistake again, but she also didn't want to accuse another man of doing something that he hadn't done. Etna had learned her lesson with Finley. Lochlan would be innocent in her mind until he was proven guilty.

I must speak to him. I must hear what he has to say.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Finley slammed the door to his study and kicked it for good measure once it was closed, unable to control his anger. He shook with it, fists clenched tightly by his sides, his body begging him to destroy something, anything to release his fury.

Me own brother. All this time, it was me own brother.

He could hardly believe it himself, but the evidence was clear. When they had made it to the brigands' hideout, they had found that they were well-prepared, waiting for them precisely where Finley had planned on striking. Some brigands had been sent to the trap, perhaps as bait, and though his men had quickly captured them, it hadn't been so easy for his own team to defeat the brigands that were waiting for them in their camp.

The only conclusion that Finley could reach was that one of the men that he trusted was the traitor since they seemed to know the entire plan, even the parts of it that he had only shared with those closest to him. And out of all of the men in his team of confidants, Lochlan had been the only one to leave his sight, even if he only did so for a short time, claiming that he had to relieve himself on the way to the hideout.

No one else could have had the chance to even send a note to the brigands. The only one who could have done it was Lochlan.

And the betrayal had broken something in Finley. He had never thought that his own brother would do that to him, and he couldn't even understand why he would betray him.

Did I na treat him weel? Did he want to be the Laird? What is it that he wanted?

Lochlan had always claimed that he wanted nothing to do with power. He was glad that Finley was the Laird and not him. He would never be able to handle all the pressure that came with leading a clan. But perhaps it had been nothing but lies, a misdirection so that Finley wouldn't suspect him. Finley didn't know what was a lie and what was true anymore. All he knew was that there was an unbearable weight on his chest, Lochlan's betrayal hanging heavy over him.

"Bastard," Finley whispered to himself, slamming his fists onto his desk and sending his papers flying around the room. "Why did he have to go and do that?"

A part of him ached at the thought that he would have to kill him, but of course, he had no choice. There was only one punishment for traitors, and that was death. He couldn't simply let him live just because he was his brother. Another part of him, though, wanted to take revenge for what Lochlan had done, no matter the cost.

The only thing that could hold him back was the thought of his grandmother. Lochlan's death would hurt him, but it would kill her, and Finley didn't want to do anything that would hurt Arlene. He loved her dearly, and he couldn't stand seeing her so broken.

And then there was Etna, who had begged him to reconsider. But what did Etna know? She had been so quick to accuse him of murder, but when it came to Lochlan's treachery, she turned a blind eye.

The knock on the door startled Finley, who was lost deep in his thoughts. Clearing his throat, he opened it and saw none other than Dougal standing there, looking as though he was walking straight into the mouth of a beast.

"Me Laird—"

"I'll stop ye right there," Finley said, and despite everything that had happened that day, seeing Dougal was pleasant, a welcome change from his boiling anger. "Ye've kent me as a wee lad. Ye can

call me Finley.”

“Finley, then . . . may I come in?’ Dougal asked, and Finley stepped aside to let the man in before he took a seat behind his study. “Perhaps this isna the best time considerin’ . . . weel, considerin’ everythin’ that happened earlier, but I wished to speak with ye.”

As he spoke, Dougal took a seat across from Finley, and Finley poured them both a cup of wine. He didn’t know about Dougal, but he certainly needed it.

“What is it?” he asked, taking a sip. “Anythin’ that takes me mind off all that for a moment is a welcome change.”

“First of all, it’s verra nice to see ye again, laddie,” Dougal said. “Although I wish that it was under different circumstances.”

“It’s good to see ye, too,” Finley said, and he was sincere. He only wished that Lochlan’s actions hadn’t tainted their reunion. “But I do hope that ye dinna come here to speak to me about me brother. I have made up me mind. There’s na changin’ it.”

“Na, I didna come here for that,” Dougal assured him. “I came to ask for yer permission to leave with Etna.”

It wasn’t what Finley had been expecting to hear, and he frowned, confused by Dougal’s words. “Leave?” he asked. “Ye only just arrived.”

“Aye, that’s true, but I’m sure that ye have different things on yer mind noo,” Dougal said. “It’s na the best time for me to be visitin’ and, weel, I do have a new position in Edinburgh. It’s what Etna always wanted. Of course, I’ll give ye the names of other tutors that I respect and trust. I wouldna dream of leavin’ wee Malina without a tutor.”

But Finley wasn’t listening. He had stopped listening the moment that Dougal said Edinburgh was what Etna always wanted. He had

known that for a long time, of course, and her return to Edinburgh had been one of the conditions of their agreement, but he had thought that after what they had shared, she would want to stay.

“Did . . . did Etna say that she wishes to go with ye?” Finley asked though he dreaded the answer.

“Aye,” Dougal said. “She said that she’s verra excited for it.”

I’m a fool. I’m nothin’ but a fool.

Finley had dared to believe that he could be happy with Etna. She was the first woman in a long time to make him feel that way, and though he hadn’t gone as far as to consider anything like marriage, he had thought that she wanted to be with him just as much as he wanted to be with her. He had dared to think that his luck had changed. He had dared to be happy.

Perhaps he could even say that he had felt the first stirrings of love. It scared him to admit it, but he felt the same way for Etna as he had felt for Anna when they had first met, and he recognized it as what it was: the beginning of love. He had fallen for her, no matter how much he had tried to keep an emotional distance from Etna, and now he had to pay the price.

But it shouldn’t have come as a surprise, he thought, to hear that Etna wanted to go back to Edinburgh still. He had been foolish to think that a few nights together would change her mind—though, for him, it had been more than just those few, steamy nights—but that didn’t mean that he wasn’t angry still.

He couldn’t help it. First, he was betrayed by Lochlan, and now he was betrayed by Etna. Anyone he came close to eventually hurt him, and it was his fault. He had allowed Etna to hurt him.

I should’ve kent better. I should have kent about Lochlan, and I should have kent that Etna would do this to me.

“If that’s what ye wish, then I willna stop ye,” Finley said as he stood from his seat, pushing down his anger just because he didn’t want Dougal to see it. “Stay here for a moment, please. I’ll find Etna, and we can discuss it further.”

If Etna wanted to leave so badly, he wanted to hear her say it. He wanted her to say it to his face.



* * *

After leaving the courtyard, Etna ran straight to Arlene’s room. When she got there, she found the woman in bed, a servant pressing a cool towel over her forehead.

“Are ye alright?” Etna asked Arlene as she rushed to her, kneeling beside her bed. Arlene smiled at her, sending the servant away with a *thank you*, and once the door was closed, she turned to look at Etna.

“Lochlan . . . how is he?” she asked.

“I dinna ken,” Etna said. “But Finley didna hurt him any further. He must be in the dungeons noo.”

Arlene let out a sigh of relief when she found out that Finley hadn’t hurt Lochlan any more than he had already had. It was a small mercy, Etna supposed. She didn’t know how much more Lochlan could handle, as he was already so battered and bruised.

“Ye must go and see him, Etna,” Arlene said. “Promise me that ye will.”

"I'm sure that the guards willna let me," Etna said. "I want to, I really do, but how can I go there? Finley must have told them to let no visitors inside."

"Get me some paper and a pen, lass," Arlene said, pointing at the vanity across the room. Etna did as she was told, passing them to Arlene, who began to scribble. Once she was done, she folded the piece of paper and handed it back to Etna. "This should do nicely," she said. "Give it to the guards, tell them that ye're there on me orders. They will let ye in. Will ye do it for me?"

Etna nodded, placing the note in her pocket. "Of course."

As she stood, Arlene reached out and grabbed her hand, stopping her. "Whatever ye do, dinna let Finley kill Lochlan," she said. "He listens to ye. Ye must promise me."

Etna didn't know how she could make such a promise. She swallowed around the knot in her throat, though, and promised it anyway because she couldn't handle the thought of Arlene in anguish. "I promise."

As Etna sneaked her way to the dungeons, her heart hammered in her chest. If Finley found out that she was there, there would be hell to pay, surely. He was so lost in his own anger that he couldn't see past his own nose, and the last thing that Etna wanted was to agitate him even more. But she had to save Lochlan. She couldn't leave him to die.

As she stepped down the stairs, Etna wasn't surprised to be stopped by two guards, who blocked her way deeper into the dungeon.

"Here," she said before they could ask her why she was there and handed one of them the note.

Once the guard read it, he nodded at his partner, and the two of them let her pass silently. Etna breathed a sigh of relief, glad that they hadn't questioned her.

It was dark in the cellar and so damp that she could feel it in her bones. The only sources of light and warmth were a few torches, and her skin broke out in goosebumps, making her shiver even as she wrapped her own arms around herself. It didn't take long to find Lochlan. He was the only occupant of the dungeon, and so he was easy to spot, even as he was curled up on the floor.

His pained moans made Etna's stomach drop. He sounded like a wounded animal, and it was then that she decided that it didn't matter what she had to do or say to Finley. She would force him to let the healer see Lochlan.

"Lochlan . . ." she said as she approached his cell, reaching in through the bars with a hand. "Lochlan, can ye hear me?"

"Etna?"

Lochlan's voice was barely a whisper, and Etna had to strain to hear him. But he sat up, if only just a little, and looked at her.

"Aye, it's me," Etna said. "How are ye feelin'? Are ye in a lot of pain?"

"Aye," Lochlan said. "How did ye get here? Didna Finley stop ye?"

"He doesna ken I'm here. Yer grandmaither sent me," Etna said. "Lochlan, tell me what happened. Ye're na the traitor, are ye?"

"Na, I swear it," Lochlan said. "I dinna ken who it is, but it isna me. But Finley wouldna hear of it. He's certain that I betrayed him, but I swear it on me life, I didna. I would never do that to him."

"I believe ye," Etna assure him. "I dinna understand why he's actin' like this either, but I promise ye, I'll do anythin' in me power to stop him."

"There's nothin' that ye can do," Lochlan said. "Once Finley has somethin' stuck in that head of his, he doesna let it go."

“He’ll listen to me,” Etna said with conviction. “He has to. He’s bein’ unreasonable, Lochlan. I ken that he wants to find the man responsible, but ye’re his brother.”

“For a long time, the only thing in his mind has been the brigands,” Lochlan said. “He blames himself for all the lives that have been lost, and I ken that he would do anythin’ to stop it. I dinna ken why, but he’s certain I’m the traitor, so the fact that I’m his brother means little to him right noo. But ye shouldna have come here. If he finds ye here, he’ll be verra angry at ye.”

“Let him,” Etna said, her anger toward Finley suddenly flaring up. “I willna let him kill an innocent man. I willna let him kill a friend.”

At that, Lochlan looked up at her and gave her a small smile, managing to find a hint of happiness even in his situation. “I’m glad I’m yer friend, Etna,” he said.

Etna reached for Lochlan’s hand, taking it in hers and giving it a comforting squeeze. But just as she opened her mouth to ask him who he thought was the real traitor, she heard thundering footsteps approach as someone descended the stairs.

Finley.

She didn’t even have to look at him to know that it was him. The angry footsteps gave him away. Etna pulled back from Lochlan, but she didn’t care if Finley had seen her hold his hand. Her allegiances were not a secret. She was on Lochlan’s side.

“Come with me,” Finley barked, but Etna simply watched him, unimpressed, with her hands on her hips. “Didna ye hear me? I said come with me.”

“How dare ye give me orders and talk to me like this?” Etna demanded. “After what ye’ve done to Lochlan? Finley, listen to him. He’s na the traitor, I’m sure that he can explain everythin’ to ye.”

"I dinna want to hear a word of it, na from him and na from ye," Finley hissed, and his tone was so vicious that Etna couldn't help but recoil. "Come noo."

"Na."

Finley glared at Etna for a moment, and she thought that he was going to give up. But instead, he grabbed her by the arm and began to drag her out of the dungeon as she tried to push him off, writhing and attempting to loosen his grip on her.

It was to no avail. Finley was strong, and he was angry, and there was no stopping him. And so, Etna was dragged along, tripping on her own feet as she followed him reluctantly.

Just ye wait until ye let go of me, Finley. Just ye wait.

Chapter Twenty-Four

When they made it to Finley's study, the first thing that Etna saw was her father, sitting there, evidently waiting for them. She frowned to herself, knowing that whatever Finley wanted to say to her couldn't possibly be good.

She watched as Finley strolled around his desk before opening a drawer and pulling out a small pouch. He tossed it carelessly at her, and Etna barely managed to catch it in her hands.

"What is this?" she asked, even though she already knew the answer. She could hear the pouch's contents jiggling, and she knew it was gold.

"Yer payment," Finley said with a small shrug, taking his seat across from Dougal. "That was the deal, wasna it? Ye do the work, and I give ye enough money to go to Edinburgh. Yer faither told me everythin'."

Etna looked at her father, cocking an eyebrow at him. "What exactly was it that me faither told ye, me Laird?" she asked.

"I had better go noo," her father said before Finley could respond to her question, already standing up. "It seems like the two of ye need to discuss this alone."

"Na, Faither," Etna said, her voice cold as ice. "Stay."

But Dougal only shook his head and rushed out of the room, leaving her and Finley alone.

"Whatever ye think that ye ken is wrong," Etna told him. "I dinna ken what me faither told ye—"

“He explained everythin’ to me,” Finley said. “He told me everythin’ that I needed to ken. Ye’re free to leave, Etna. It’s what ye always wanted, isnae it?”

Etna hesitated. It was, indeed, what she had always wanted, but she didn’t want it anymore. “Aye, but—”

“Thank ye,” Finley said, and he didn’t even sound angry to her anymore. If anything, he sounded defeated and as though he had given up, his voice tired and devoid of any emotion. “That is all.”

Etna stared at Finley, but he didn’t even glance at her, busying himself with the papers on his desk. Etna didn’t know how to get through to him. He had closed himself off from everyone else once more, and as usual, it was impossible to change his mind.

What did me faither tell him?

“Finley, I . . . I dinna ken what me faither said, but dinna ye wish to hear what I have to say?” she asked.

“I dinna have to,” Finley said, and for the first time in a while, he finally looked at her. “I thought that . . . weel, silly as it sounds, I thought that there was somethin’ between us, whatever that may be. I . . . I can even call it love, at least from my part. After all these years, I dared to love someone again. I dared to trust another woman, and ye . . . ye didna even have the courage to tell me that ye wished to leave yerself. I had to find out through yer faither that ye were still plannin’ on goin’ to Edinburgh.”

Etna didn’t know what to say. The moment she heard that Finley loved her, her stomach twisted itself into a knot, and her ears stopped listening.

He loves me?

Do I love him?

Her father's words came back to her, telling her that she would know when she fell in love, and they echoed in her mind. And at that moment, she knew that she had fallen for Finley, too.

She had never felt anything like it before, that fierce love for a man. It was more than just physical, much more, and Etna didn't need to question her feelings anymore. It scared her to think that she had fallen for him so fast, but she couldn't hide the truth from herself anymore. She knew it in her heart that she loved him and wanted to be with him more than anything.

But Finley wouldn't listen to her, no matter what she tried.

"Leave me study, please," Finley said then, pulling her out of her thoughts.

"But Finley—"

"Noo!"

His voice was thunder, so loud that it almost shook the walls. Etna flinched and stumbled backward, and she didn't dare to meet Finley's hateful gaze. Tears welled up in her eyes as she turned around and stormed off, slamming the door behind her.

Finley could be so cruel when he wanted to and so very stubborn. Etna had managed to convince him of nothing, and if anything, everything between them had gotten worse. She had been so stupid to think that she could fix anything, especially when Finley was already furious by what he perceived to be a betrayal from Lochlan. Perhaps if he cooled off, she thought, she would manage to change his mind and make him see reason. She just had to give him a little time.

But that didn't mean that it hurt any less to see Finley like that and to hear those cruel words. They were like a knife to Etna's gut, and they hurt her more than anything else.

“Etna!”

The voice came from the other side of the corridor, and Etna looked up just in time to see Malina running toward her. The little girl crashed into her, wrapping her arms tightly around her legs and refusing to let go.

“Dinna leave,” Malina said through sniffles, and when Etna crouched down to look at her, she saw that she was crying, big, bulbous tears running down her cheeks. Etna wiped them off with a sigh, pressing a kiss on her forehead. “Please, Etna. I dinna want ye to leave noo. I want ye to stay here, with us. Why do ye have to leave?”

Etna hated seeing Malina like that. It broke her heart every time that she was sad, and the last thing that he wanted was to become the source of her sadness. But what could she say to her? As much as she didn’t want to leave, she didn’t think that she had a choice anymore. Finley was bound to send her away, even if she insisted that she wanted to stay.

“Who said I’m leavin’?” Etna asked, deciding that perhaps it would be best to lie to Malina, I only for a little while. She wanted to try to speak to Finley again once he would calm down, to see if she could get through to him and explain her side of things to him, hoping that she wouldn’t have to leave.

“Everyone says so,” Malina said, and not for the first time, Etna cursed the speed at which gossip traveled around the castle.

“We’ll talk about it after supper, aye?” Etna asked Malina as she wiped some more tears off her cheeks. “Dinna fash yerself, Malina. I’m right here. I’m with ye.”

“So ye willna leave?” Malina asked, never one to let a subject go before it was resolved.

“As I said, we’ll talk about it later,” Etna repeated. She didn’t want to outright lie to her and set up a bad example, especially when she

always tried to teach her that lying was bad. "I'll tell ye everythin' that ye wish to ken. But for noo, we'll just go to yer chambers for a while until it's time for supper."

Malina nodded, but she still clung onto Etna, refusing to let go. Etna collected her in her arms with a sigh, picking her up and carrying her to her chambers. "I'll come and be with ye in a moment, aye?" she said. "I just need to speak to me faither, first."

Malina nodded, and Etna left the room, heading straight to her father's own, hoping that she would find him there. And indeed, she found him packing, something that irked her to no end.

"What are ye doin'?" she asked him as she stepped into the room. "We didna even talk about this."

"Etna, it's only wise that we leave noo," Dougal said. "Ye saw the Laird . . . this doesna involve us. We should leave before we become involved."

"I am involved," Etna said. "Ye may na be, but I canna leave Lochlan to rot in that cell, and I certainly canna let Finley kill him. And . . . I simply dinna wish to go, Faither. I wish to stay here."

With a sigh, Dougal approached Etna, placing a firm hand on her shoulder. "Ye always liked to fix things," he said. "But this isna somethin' that ye can fix. It isna yer fight to fight. I thought ye loved Edinburgh, Etna. I thought that ye would jump at the chance to leave this place after everythin' ye wrote to me about it. Ye hate it here."

Etna shook her head. "Na. Na anymore," she said. "And I'm sorry. I ken that ye took that position in Edinburgh for me, but I . . . Faither, I'm in love with Finley. I wish to stay here."

Her father seemed speechless at her confession. He opened and closed his mouth a few times, seemingly trying to find the right words to say, but in the end, he gave up and walked to the bed, sitting down on the edge of the mattress. Etna joined him, and she,

too, had no words. Instead of speaking, she took the pouch of gold that Finley had given her and passed it to her father.

“Are ye serious?” Dougal asked.

Etna let out a hollow laugh. “Of course, I’m serious,” she said. “Why would I lie about somethin’ like that?”

“How . . . how did that even happen?” her father asked. “I thought ye hated the Laird.”

“I did when I first met him,” Etna admitted. “Faither, a lot has changed since me last letter to ye. I’m sorry, I should have told ye, but I didna ken that ye would accept a position in Edinburgh or that ye would want me to leave this place . . . I didna even ken that I loved him until . . .”

“Until ye asked me how I kent that I loved yer maither?” her father asked, and Etna nodded in agreement. “Ye dinna have to apologize to me, Etna. Nor do ye have to come to Edinburgh with me. I dinna only take the position for ye. I enjoy teachin’.”

Etna was relieved to know that she wasn’t the only reason why Dougal had taken the job. It lifted a weight off her shoulders, but there were still other thoughts plaguing her, namely those revolving around Lochlan and Finley.

“I dinna ken what to do, Faither,” she said, and her voice sounded desperate even to her own ears. The events of the day had exhausted her, and so had the way that Finley had treated her. All she wanted to do was sleep and forget it all, but she knew that sleep would never come, even if she tried. “How will I get through to him?”

“Finley was always a stubborn lad,” Dougal said with a sigh. “The best thing ye can do right noo is to leave him alone, to give him some space.”

“But what if he orders Lochlan’s execution?” Etna asked. “I canna let him do that.”

“Na . . . na I suppose ye canna,” her father agreed. “If that happens, then ye must confront him. But until then, give him some time. He might see that he’s bein’ unreasonable when he calms down.”

“If he calms down,” Etna corrected him.

“When,” her father insisted. “They always do, in the end.”

For a few moments, the two of them sat in silence. Etna twirled her thumbs, gaze glued onto her lap and mind working overtime, trying to figure out a way to convince Finley to let Lochlan go. Then, Dougal spoke once more as he dropped the pouch of gold into her hands.

“As temptin’ as this is, I dinna want it,” he said. “Give it back to Finley and tell him what ye told me. He’ll listen to ye, Etna. Once he’s calmed down, he’s bound to listen.”

Her father’s words were reassuring to Etna. Out of the two of them, she was certain that he knew Finley best, having spent so many years teaching him, and if he believed that Finley would listen to her, then she believed it, too.

“Will ye leave, then?” Etna asked. “Even though ye only just arrived?”

“I suppose I could stay a while longer,” Dougal said with a small sigh. “I did come to see ye, after all, and I havenae had the chance to talk to ye as much as I’d like. And since ye’re na comin’ to Edinburgh with me . . .”

Dougal’s voice trailed off, and Etna felt guilty for refusing to go with him, not for the first time. She wished that she could have both. She wished that she could go to Edinburgh and be with Finley, but she would never ask him to give up his clan. His place

was in that castle.

“Weel, regardless,” her father said, giving her a smile, “I should go speak to Arlene. Is she alright?”

“She’s verra shaken,” Etna said as she stood, following her father to the door. “Ye should go to her, aye. I think it will do her plenty of good.”

As Dougal walked to Arlene’s room, Etna made her way to the healer’s. She had to convince the man to take a look at Lochlan’s wounds, no matter what Finley said, though the task would be impossible if the guards didn’t cooperate with them.

Perhaps I can use Arlene’s note again. She would want Lochlan’s wounds to be tended to.

Anger coursed through her once more as she thought of the damage that Finley had done to his own brother. But she tried to calm herself, knowing that Finley was only reacting in such a way because of what had happened to him in the past.

He will see reason. Surely, he will.

If only Etna truly believed that, it would make everything so much easier.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Etna decided that the best course of action would be to tell Malina the truth as soon as possible. It would do more harm than good to hide it from her, and she didn't want to lie, no matter how painful the truth would be for both of them.

Malina wasn't just a student to her anymore. She was like her own child, and Etna wondered if her father felt the same way for all the children he had tutored. She couldn't imagine spending so much time with a child like Malina and not bonding with them beyond what her duty required. She was so full of life, so excited about the world, and she had so much love to give to everyone around her. Etna had never stood a chance of leaving her without shedding some tears.

But as painful as it would be, she knew that it wouldn't take Malina long to recover. Sooner than later, she would have another tutor, perhaps one that would be even better than Etna, and she would move on just fine.

She didn't know if it was going to be as easy for her, though. Finley had been her first real love, the only man who had made her feel something more than a silly infatuation. She had been ready to leave Edinburgh behind for him, she had been ready to commit to him, but now she would have to move on, too.

I just canna imagine bein' with anyone else.

With a heavy sigh and two fingers pinching the bridge of her nose, trying to delay the inevitable headache that was already announcing its presence, Etna made her way to the dining hall, as she had promised Malina that she would speak to her at dinner, and that time was fast approaching. But when she got there, she didn't find Malina.

It struck Etna as odd since Malina never missed dinner, and she was always one of the first to go to the dining hall. She liked to talk to the servants and pester the head housekeeper, but even when Etna looked under the tables, where Malina often hid and played, she was nowhere to be found.

“Are ye lookin’ for wee Malina?” one of the servants asked her, a woman that Etna recognized as Liliias when he saw her search under the tables.

“Aye,” Etna said. “Have ye seen her?”

“Na . . . perhaps she’s in her chambers still?”

That seemed to Etna like the most likely possibility, and so she made her way to Malina’s chambers, but the girl wasn’t there either. With Finley preoccupied with other matters, Arlene in her state, and Lochlan in the dungeons, she couldn’t think of why she would be outside of the castle since she knew better than that and never left alone or without permission.

Still, perhaps the events of the day had rattled her, even though Etna had tried to shield her from everything that had happened. She began to search the castle in earnest, asking the servants if they had seen her, but no one had.

How could na one have seen her? She must be somewhere here!

Panic gripped Etna at the thought that something could have happened to Malina. Could someone have taken her? Could she have left on her own? Etna didn’t know, but she wouldn’t rest until she found her.

“Me lady . . .” one of the maids called, rushing to her down the corridor that led to Malina’s rooms. “I found this on her bed.”

The girl handed Etna the note, and Etna unfolded it with trembling hands, fearing the worst. Someone must have taken her, and they

were holding her for ransom. The brigands had finally managed to make their way into the castle, and they knew exactly what to do to hurt Finley.

But when Etna opened the note, her shaking hands almost ripping it apart in her haste, she breathed a sigh of relief.

I am going to the loch. The fairies will grant my wish.

It was all that the note said, but Etna quickly recognized the handwriting as belonging to Malina, not yet as refined as one of an adult. But even if the handwriting hadn't given her away, her words would have. Etna remembered telling her the story about the wish-granting fairies that lived in the lake.

The situation wasn't as dire as Etna had originally thought, but that didn't give her much comfort. Malina wasn't in any immediate danger, but it was getting dark, and there was no telling who could be dwelling around the lake. Besides, if she took one wrong step, she could end up in the water, and no one would be able to help her.

I must go. I must go after her.

She wasted no time grabbing her earisaid and running out of the castle. She didn't even bother taking a horse with her since the lake wasn't too far, and Malina couldn't walk that fast. She couldn't help but wonder, though, when Malina had left the castle. If they were lucky, she wouldn't have even made it to the lake, and Etna would manage to get to her on the way there.

The guards greeted her as she rushed past the gates, but she didn't have time to pay them any mind. She ran, her feet heavy on the ground, each step kicking up a cloud of dust from the dry earth. Her heart hammered in her chest, beating faster with every step she took as her mind came up with different scenarios, each worse than before.

What if somethin' has already happened to her?

What if someone found her?

What if someone forced her to write that note?

But no, it couldn't be. A brigand couldn't have possibly slipped into the castle undetected, she told herself. With Finley's paranoia, especially after thinking that Lochlan was involved with the brigands, security around the castle was tight, and its walls were impenetrable. Someone would have spotted them. Someone would have stopped them before they could get to Malina.

In her hurry, Etna hadn't even grabbed a torch with her, but now that the sun was setting quickly, she regretted that choice. Soon, she would be plunged into darkness, and the only thing that could guide her down the path would be the light of the moon. She only hoped that the clouds weren't too thick for the moonlight to reach her.

"Malina?" she shouted, her voice sounding desperate and frightened. If only she could reach her, if only she could yell loudly enough for her to hear, then perhaps the little girl would run back to her. "Malina, can you hear me? Where are you?"

But there was no response to her questions other than her own echo.

It's fine. Everythin' is fine. She must be at the loch, and she canna hear me from this far.

Etna kept repeating reassurances to herself. They were the only thing that kept her going when fear had made her knees wobbly, and her legs go numb. She pushed through it all, running down the path, picking herself up every time she stumbled in her hurry.

The hem of her dress quickly became torn and muddy as it got tangled in branches and as Etna stepped on it. Her skin was covered in a thin sheen of sweat, her hands balled up into fists as though she was trying to hold onto some tangible hope.

After what seemed like hours—but couldn't have been more than a quarter of an hour—Etna finally saw the lake. But in the darkness, she couldn't see if there was anyone there. Malina was so small that even if she was there, Etna knew she wouldn't be able to see her until she was right up to the water.

But she never made it that far.

Before she could get to the lake, four strong hands grabbed her, shooting out of the darkness that surrounded her. Etna screamed in terror, shrill and deafening, but her captors didn't even flinch.

Had they been expectin' me? Had they been waitin' for me here?

Do they have Malina?

As much as Etna tried to search for her, she couldn't see anything clearly. There were only the shapes of the trees and the bushes and those of the men that towered over her as they dragged her closer to the lake.

They'll kill me. And then how will I help Malina?

It was that thought that spurred Etna into action. She kicked her legs out, thrashing in the men's grip, and her heel soon found a target in one of their shins. The man to her right groaned in pain, hands loosening, but not enough to let her go.

It didn't matter. Escaping was her only option, and Etna would do anything it took.

"What are ye doin'?" she heard the other man growl. "Hold her!"

"I'm tryin'!" the one she had kicked said. "Dinna ye see how the bitch is fightin'?"

It was Etna's turn to let out a growl at that, one that rumbled out of her chest as she tried to bite the other man's arm. Her teeth

connected with his flesh, breaking the skin, but the man was quick to slap her, her head twisting to the other side.

For a moment, the edges of her vision went completely dark, and there was a buzzing in her ears. Her entire head throbbed with pain, the slap packing so much strength that it left her reeling.

Her limbs were useless for only a second, but it was all the two men needed to tighten their grips on her. Seeing that she wouldn't stop kicking them if they let her, one man grabbed her arms and the other her legs, lifting her off the ground and carrying her closer to the lake. As much as she tried to make them lose their grip on her, her efforts were to no avail, and their bruising fingers held tightly onto her, refusing to let go.

Etna didn't give up hope, though. Even if they planned on throwing her in the lake, she was a good swimmer. Her dress would weigh her down, but she had plenty of strength left, and she'd be damned if she would let those thugs drown her, especially if they had gotten her hands on Malina.

"Let me go!" Etna said as they carried her, still trying to kick and scratch her way out of their hands. "Do ye have Malina? Answer me!"

But just as Etna had been expecting, no answer came. Before long, the two men threw her on the ground, and Etna's breath was cut short as her back hit the soil. She groaned, the impact leaving her gasping and trying to regain her strength to attack them once more. Her fingers dug into the earth, hands pushing herself up, but before she could go far, one of the men promptly held her down with a hand on the back of her neck.

She was trapped. There was nothing for her to do, nowhere for her to go. If they planned on killing her on land, then she couldn't fight them off, no matter how much she tried.

"Just tell me if ye have the bairn," Etna pleaded with them, though she didn't know how that knowledge could possibly help her. All it

would do would be to make her sink deeper into her despair if she found out that they had her and that there was nothing that she could do to save her. "Please! I need to ken if she's alright.

"Dinna fash yerself, Etna," a familiar voice said from the shadows, accompanied by approaching footsteps. "Malina is right here with me."

Chapter Twenty-Six

The castle was in chaos. Finley could tell even from where he sat in his study.

He had spent hours in there, the entire time thinking about Lochlan's betrayal. He could hardly believe that his own brother had gone behind his back and teamed up with some brigands who wanted nothing more than to destroy the clan. The two of them had grown up together. They had shared everything. Finley had relied on him when he couldn't rely on anyone else. He had told him things that he had never even shared with Anna; he had loved him dearly.

No. He loved him still.

He didn't think that his love for Lochlan would ever fade, just like his love for Anna had never faded. He wasn't that lucky. Despite his betrayal and despite Finley's own fury, it seemed impossible that he would ever stop loving him.

Finley wished more than anything that it was all a misunderstanding or even a dream. But how could it be a misunderstanding when all the evidence pointed at Lochlan? He had been reluctant to see it at first, telling himself that he was crazy, that there was no way his brother would have done such a thing. Even if Lochlan held no love for him for whatever reason or even if he was after his title, he still wouldn't have hurt his own clan. He had seen him with his men; a bond like that couldn't be faked.

But did he na already fool me once? I thought that we had a bond, too. A stronger one, even.

As much as Finley had tried to deny it, and as much as the men

were reluctant to believe it, Lochlan had betrayed them all. And he couldn't let the traitor get away with it, even if it was his own brother.

Lochlan would have to hang, and Finley would have to be the one to give the order. His stomach twisted itself in a knot at the thought, bile rising to the back of his throat. The mere thought of having to kill his own brother was enough to break his heart all over again. His hands began to tremble, breath coming out in short puffs as his vision darkened, but he quickly pulled himself back from the edge. He didn't have the time for panic.

Why? Why Lochlan? Why would ye betray me?

But it wasn't just Lochlan. It was also Etna who had convinced him that she cared about him but who had been using him and lying to him the entire time.

That's what I get for trustin' people again.

He should have never let Etna get so close to him. He should have known better after what had happened with Anna. But Etna seemed so genuine, so honest. And she was beautiful, as beautiful on the outside as on the inside.

Or at least, so Finley had thought before her true colors were revealed to him. She, too, was nothing but a traitor. He had given her his heart, only to have it shattered once more, but from then on, Finley would be more careful.

He vowed to never love another woman as long as he lived. He had done it for years, and it wouldn't be that hard to do it again.

As he sat at his desk, face hidden in his hands, he felt his eyes burn, but he refused to shed a tear for either Lochlan or Etna. They didn't deserve it.

The knock on his door startled him, and Finley all but jumped out

of his seat, trying to look at least mildly presentable, hands smoothing over the wrinkled and soiled fabric of his shirt. "Come in," he said, and when the door opened, it revealed none other than Arlene.

Finley shot out of his seat and rushed to her, wrapping an arm around her shoulders as he led her to a chair, much to Arlene's chagrin.

"Finley, we dinna have time for this," Arlene said as she pushed him off. Her expression was one of thinly veiled panic and fear, and Finley thought that he knew precisely what she had come there to tell him.

She wants me to forgive Lochlan. She wants me to spare his life.

After all, she had been so shaken with the news and with Finley's treatment of his brother that she had almost collapsed. She was their grandmother. It would have only surprised him if Arlene hadn't tried to persuade him to give him another chance.

But when Arlene spoke, the words were not what Finley had expected to hear.

"Malina is gone," she said, grabbing Finley's arms in a strong grip that didn't fit a woman of her age. "We think that Etna has gone after her to find her, but neither of them is anywhere to be seen. Ye must send yer men to find them, Finley. Noo."

Finley's veins turned to ice, his heart stalling in his chest. No, it couldn't be Malina. Nothing could have happened to her because then Finley wouldn't know what to do with himself. It was a thought that he couldn't bear, one that he refused to even entertain.

"Finley!" Arlene shouted, pulling him out of his panicked trance. "Send them noo."

Finley wasted no time before he rushed out of his study, ordering

the first guard in his path to alert everyone else. He gathered them all in the courtyard, voice booming as he spoke to them.

“Me daughter is gone, and so is Etna,” he said. “Ye are to leave immediately and search for them.”

There was silence among his men for a moment, and the fact that they weren’t moving enraged Finley. “We have na time for this! Go!”

“But me Laird . . . where are we to look for them? Where do we start?” one of the men asked, the others echoing his question. And it was a question to which Finley didn’t have an answer.

He didn’t know where he should send them first. Malina and Etna could be anywhere. He didn’t even know when they had disappeared from the castle, so there was no telling how far they could have gotten.

“Split into groups,” he told them. He needed them to cover as much ground as possible, even if it was more dangerous that way. If brigands had taken his little girl, then they would surely be on high alert for any approaching soldiers. “Cover the entire area around the castle. Na one returns until we find them.”

His men, acknowledging his command, began to prepare to go outside the castle walls, and Finley decided to do the same. There was no way that he wouldn’t go out there with them. He would find Malina, and he would bring her home, even if he had to search for days and nights.

Anythin’ to save her. Anythin’.

And then, there was also Etna. She had betrayed him, and she had hurt him. That much was certain. But Finley’s chest heaved, and his knees weakened at the thought of any harm coming her way. He didn’t know what he would do if he found her body instead of her. The thought was too much to bear.

He loved her. He couldn't deny it.

I must find her, too.

Before he could mount a horse, though, another guard rushed to him, panting as he spoke.

"Me laird, Lochlan is askin' for ye," the man said, though he did so hesitantly, as though mentioning Lochlan's name in Finley's presence would mean his end.

That was hardly the time for him to have a chat with his brother. Whatever Lochlan had to say to him would have to wait. Besides, it was probably just another lie, nothing that was worth his attention even when he didn't have a matter of life and death in his hands.

"Do ye na ken what's happenin'?" Finley asked the man. "Tell him I canna see him noo."

He expected the guard to rush off, but the man lingered, taking a deep breath before he continued.

"He was quite insistent, me laird," the guard said. "He says that he doesna want much of yer time but that he needs to see ye right the noo. He says it's important."

"What could be more important than me daughter's life?" Finley asked. "I'll speak to him when I return."

"He says it's about the brigands," the guard added, and Finley took a pause, glancing at him.

If Lochlan was going to give him information about the brigands, it could prove to be helpful. Though he didn't know how any of them could have possibly made it into the castle, a part of him—a big part—feared that it had been the brigands who had taken Malina. It could give them a place to start looking, at least, a hint to their whereabouts.

"Fine," he huffed as he pushed past the guard, rushing to the dungeons and running down the stairs like a man possessed. Once he saw Lochlan, he paused once more, the sight of him behind bars, looking so desperate and defeated, making Finley falter.

He hated seeing him like that. And he hated himself for whatever he had done that had pushed Lochlan to become who he was.

He knew that his brother hadn't always been that way. There had been a time when he would have never betrayed Finley, and so he could only assume that it had been his own behavior that had pushed Lochlan to betray him.

"Finley!" Lochlan shouted the moment he spotted him. "Finley, please, ye must listen to me."

"Make this quick, Lochlan," Finley said as he walked up to the bars, hands crossed over his chest. "There is a situation. Malina is gone. I must go find her."

Lochlan's jaw fell at that, his eyes widening with fear. "G-gone?" he asked. "Gone where? Did the brigands take her?"

"I dinna ken," Finley said. "Ye're the one who can answer that."

But if there was one thing that Finley knew, that was that Lochlan would have never done anything to hurt Malina. Perhaps he was nothing more than an informant to the brigands, and he had nothing to do with her disappearance, or perhaps the brigands had nothing to do with it at all. Either way, Lochlan adored her like his own daughter, and Finley knew that she was the one person he would never hurt.

"I canna!" Lochlan said. "Ye must believe me! I'm na the traitor. But I think that I ken who is."

Finley narrowed his eyes at Lochlan, shaking his head. "If ye're tryin' to blame it all on someone else—"

"I'm tellin' the truth," Lochlan interrupted. "Noo, listen to me. There's somethin', I must confess."

Lochlan came to grab the bars with trembling hands, their faces only inches apart as he spoke again. "I've been in love with Mairi for a long time," he said. "The maid. I kent that ye wouldnae approve of our relationship, and so I saw her in secret, and I saw her often."

"What does that have to do with anythin'?" Finley asked. "I told ye, I'm in a hurry."

"Listen to me!" Lochlan demanded. "As I said, I saw her often. Even when we were lookin' for the brigands away from the castle. She was there when they burned down the village. Remember? I wasnae there, fightin' by yer side because I was with her. She followed me to the village and she . . . she insisted that we stayed for a night at the inn, away from everyone else. And she . . . she was always interested in our missions. I kent that she's a clever lass, so I thought that it all . . . weel, fascinated her. I wanted to impress her, and I told her . . . I told her so many things, Finley. I talked to her about our plans, I told her everythin' that I kent because I thought . . . I thought she would like me more if I did, that she would think I'm clever, too."

Finley didn't know what to believe anymore. Mairi was nothing but a servant girl, and as clever as Lochlan thought she was, she couldn't have possibly done it all by herself.

Then again, if Lochlan's words were to be trusted, she had done nothing more than pass on some information to the brigands. That was hardly a difficult task, and if she was as clever as Lochlan claimed, then tricking him into telling her the plans couldn't have been too difficult.

"But why?" Finley asked. "Why would Mairi do such a thing? What does she have to gain?"

"I dinna ken," Lochlan said. "But what did I have to gain, Finley?"

Nothin'. What would I gain from betrayin' me own brother? Ye must believe me. I would never do such a thing to ye. I'm only a fool who loved the wrong woman. Whatever it is that Mairi wanted, I can assure ye, I'll find out. I'll do anythin' it takes."

It seemed farfetched but so farfetched that Finley couldn't believe Lochlan had made it up. He could have easily pinned the blame on someone else, one of his own men, but why would he pin it on Mairi if it wasn't true? Why would he choose a maid over a trained man?

"Me Laird?" the guard that had followed him there said, clearing his throat to get his attention. "I didna think much of it at that moment but . . . I saw Mairi earlier. She was on horseback, and she had somethin' wrapped in a blanket with her."

Finley turned to look at the other man. "Somethin'?"

"Somethin' that could have been a bairn," the man clarified. "It was big enough, roughly wee Malina's size if she was curled up."

Terror coursed through Finley's body as realization hit him. If the guard was right and Lochlan was telling the truth, then Malina was in more danger than they had all thought.

"Finley," Lochlan said, reaching through the bars and grabbing his hand before he could pull away. "Ye ken me better than anyone. Ye ken that I would never betray ye. Let me out of here. Take me with ye. If . . . if she's done anythin' to Malina, I'll . . . I'll kill her meself."

Finley looked at Lochlan and found nothing but honesty in his gaze and his words. He felt like a fool for putting him in that cell in the first place. That was his brother, the man that he knew better than anyone else. How could he have believed so easily that Lochlan would betray him? He should have been wary from the start. He should have known that something far more sinister was going on.

Will he ever forgive me for what I did to him?

Even if he did, Finley wouldn't be able to forgive himself. He would always carry the burden of what he had done to his brother for the rest of his life.

But he couldn't think about that, not when Malina's life was in danger. He gave Lochlan's hand a squeeze, nodding fervently before he turned to look at the guard.

"Let him out," he commanded, and the man scrambled to obey, opening the door to the cell. Lochlan was far from his best shape. Finley guessed that he was tired, cold, and hungry, and every time he spoke, the wound on his lip reopened. But his gaze was hard as iron, determined. For Malina, he would find to the very end.

The two of them rushed out of the dungeons and back to the courtyard, Finley barking an order at the stableboy to grab Lochlan a horse. The rest of the men seemed confused, frowning at Lochlan's sudden presence, but none of them dared to ask a single thing. Once they were all ready to go, Finley moved to the front, leading the group.

"We ken noo that the most likely possibility is that Mairi has Malina," he told his men. "She was seen headin' to the loch earlier today. We also ken that Mairi is the real traitor, and na Lochlan. Assume that the brigands are there. Dinna let yer guard down. Fight them, even if it's the last thing ye do."

His men roared behind him as the gates opened. The group poured out of them, the horses' hooves splitting the night air like thunder, the men's war cries echoing around the valley.

When Finley turned his head, he saw Lochlan right next to him, and he knew that his little girl would be safe.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Etna!”

The sound of Malina’s voice erupted in the air, forcing Etna’s gaze to search for her in the dark. She sounded so scared and so, so little, and Etna would never forgive herself if she allowed anything to happen to her.

But she was just as scared as Malina. Her heart beat fast in her chest, out of rhythm, her blood pumping in her veins with a viciousness that she had never felt before. She didn’t remember a time when she had been as scared as in that moment, her head swimming with it, her entire body shaking uncontrollably.

And though she feared for herself and her life, it was mostly Malina that she cared about. If she were to die there, then she would make her peace with it. But she could never make peace with Malina’s death.

It wasn’t long before she located her, a small, shadowy figure in the dark eclipsed by a much larger one. Etna didn’t need to see the woman to know who she was. She had heard her voice, crystal clear.

She just couldn’t understand what was happening.

“Mairi,” she said, swallowing as she tried to get her lips to move. Her mouth was dry, her lips chapped, and her tongue unable to form any words. “What are ye doin’? What is happenin’?”

Why does Mairi have Malina? Why would she ever hurt her?

Etna was a clever woman. She could put two and two together, and it didn’t take her long to see that Mairi had been behind the brigand

attacks, feeding them information, though she didn't know how she could have possibly obtained it. Through Lochlan, perhaps, who had been so smitten with her that Etna would expect him to do anything for her.

Though it seemed strange, she could understand that. Maybe she wanted money. Maybe she wanted a different life, and she thought that the brigands were her ticket out of the castle.

But that didn't explain why she would capture Malina and hold her hostage.

Is she plannin' to ask the Laird for gold?

Finley would give anything she asked to guarantee Malina's safety. There was no doubt about that. And that thought gave her hope. If Mairi needed Malina to negotiate, then she wouldn't hurt her.

The sudden flare of light blinded Etna for a moment. When her eyes adjusted to the newly-lit torches that the men were carrying, she saw that there were many more than just two. There must have been a dozen, at least, she counted, all of them standing around her and Mairi.

And then, when she looked at the other woman, she saw that she was holding a knife to Malina's throat. The blade glinted against her fragile skin, and Malina whimpered, looking at Etna with wide, pleading eyes.

Panic burst through Etna, her entire body going rigid at the sight in front of her. How could someone be so cruel as to threaten a small child? Etna couldn't wrap her head around it. She couldn't believe that anyone, no matter how cruel, could do such a thing.

And she knew Mairi. She had talked to her. She had seen how she acted around Lochlan. Surely, she wasn't a cruel woman. Etna told herself that Mairi was just desperate or perhaps too ambitious or even confused. She didn't want to entertain the possibility that she had managed to fool everyone in the castle.

“Mairi, please . . .” Etna’s voice was barely a whisper, but she knew Mairi had heard her from the way that she laughed. She didn’t sound like herself anymore, but rather like a shadow of herself, hollow and devoid of any emotion. There was no joy behind that laugh, no humor in her tone. It was cold as ice, and it made Etna freeze on the spot.

“Mairi, please!” the other woman said, mocking Etna with a high-pitched voice. “Ye still dinna understand, do ye? I thought ye were smarter than this, Etna.”

“Na. I dinna,” Etna admitted. “How could I? Ye’re na the lass that I ken. I dinna even recognize ye anymore. What has happened to ye? Why are ye doin’ this?”

Mairi sighed, shaking her head. “There’s so much that ye dinna ken, Etna. There’s so much that na one kens, but that will change soon. See, me plan has worked perfectly. Ye werena a part of it, though, until verra recently. I suppose ye’re quite unlucky when it comes to that. Had I carried me plan out a few weeks ago, ye’d be safe noo. I wouldna have a reason to kill ye.”

Etna frowned at Mairi’s words, unable to understand a single thing that she was telling her. Why would she ever want to kill her? What had she ever done, other than show her and Lochlan support?

“Do ye truly wish to ken why I’m doin’ this?” Mairi asked, and Etna was quick to nod her head.

“Aye, I do,” she said. “I think that the least ye can do, given the circumstances, is to give me an explanation.”

“Verra weel . . . I’ll tell ye about me plan,” Mairi said. Then, she began to step closer to Etna, dragging Malina along, who stumbled in front of her as she was manhandled roughly. Etna wanted to yell at her to stop. Still, she also didn’t want to give Mairi another reason other than whatever it was she already had to kill either of them. So she remained quiet, trying to will Malina to stay calm with just her gaze, hoping that her eyes would convey what she couldn’t

Speak.

It's alright. It will all be alright. Dinna be frightened.

"Me plan has been, from the verra start, to make Finley as miserable as possible," Mairi said, much to Etna's shock. She would have never guessed that Mairi would have such a personal motive to hurt Malina. And it also meant that she didn't want any gold. She didn't need Malina to be unharmed. If anything, she seemed determined to cause her as much harm as she could, and that thought terrified Etna. "I decided that I would take everythin' away from him. Everythin' that he holds dear. Malina, Lochlan, and noo ye."

Could it be that Mairi is in love with Finley? Could it be that her love drove her mad?

But Etna couldn't hear any love or even desire in her tone. All she could detect when she spoke about Finley was disgust and hatred, and so she didn't think that there had ever been anything between them, not even a one-sided attraction from Mairi's part.

"It's a shame that I had to involve ye in all this," Mairi said, though she didn't sound very regretful. "If ye had only kept yer hatred for Finley, I wouldna have to be doin' this noo."

"Na one is forcin' ye to keep me here or to kill me," Etna pointed out. "Same for Malina. Ye're the one who's makin' all the choices here, clearly."

It surprised her, seeing Mairi seemingly be in charge of a group of brigands. But Mairi just laughed, shaking her head once more. "These men dinna answer to me," she told Etna. "But they did agree to help me as long as I gave them useful information, and that is precisely what I did. Ye'd be surprised at how talkative Lochlan can be when I give him the right incentive."

Poor Lochlan . . . if Finley doesna kill him, then this will.

Etna realized that Lochlan was a strong man, but he was also sweet and kind and gentle. Sensitive. He was the kind of man who would be broken by such a thing, and Etna knew immediately that he would also blame himself for everything. Even though he wasn't the traitor, he had been the one who gave Mairi all the information she needed, and Etna knew that it would eat him up alive.

If he survived Finley's wrath, that was. There was no telling what was happening in the castle. Though Etna hoped that someone would notice Malina's absence sooner or later, and they would come to find her.

She had been so foolish, going out there on her own. She should have gone to Finley. First, she should have informed him about the situation and allowed him to take the lead, but when she realized that Malina could have been in danger, everything else faded apart from her instinct to protect her. Etna blamed herself for the predicament in which they both were. She should have been smarter. She should have known her own limits.

But she was never good at that in the first place.

"Ye're makin' na sense, Mairi," Etna said. She noticed that Mairi liked to talk, and she decided to use it to her full advantage. As long as they talked, as long as she kept Mairi occupied, she wouldn't hurt Malina. Perhaps Etna could even stall her long enough for Finley and his men to find them and save their lives.

And besides, she was curious to know what had driven Mairi to such extreme measures, and she was eager to give her a piece of her mind, as well.

"Why are ye doin' all this?" Etna continued. "I dinna understand. What has Finley ever done to ye? Is it because ye think that he wouldna let ye marry Lochlan?"

Mairi laughed as though the mere notion of it was ridiculous. And Etna had to admit that perhaps it was. Why would she hurt Lochlan too if she loved him?

"I never had any intention of marryin' Lochlan," Mairi said. "Dinna ye see? It was all a ploy. I had to get close to him somehow, and sleepin' with him was the easiest way to do it. Such a fool, that laddie . . . he must still think that I am truly in love with him."

"Ye certainly did a good job at pretendin'," Etna said, her tone dripping with bitterness. "I saw ye two with me own eyes. And it seemed to me like ye loved him. Are ye certain that ye have na warm feelings for him at all?"

"Please," Mairi scoffed. "Do ye think that by appealin' to my feelings, ye'll get yerself out of this? I have news for ye, Etna. I dinna have feelings. Na anymore. Everythin' I had . . . everythin' I felt, Finley shattered it all. He took everythin' away from me, and noo I will take everythin' away from him. He doesna deserve to have anythin' that brings him happiness. He doesna deserve a daughter or a wife or even a moment of joy, so I will take it all from him."

Mairi sounded deranged, mad with hatred for Finley. Etna could see her fingers tightening around the handle of the knife until her knuckles turned white, its blade pressing harder against Malina's throat and drawing another desperate whimper out of her.

"Please . . . dinna hurt Malina," she pleaded. She would gladly trade her own life for Malina's. She would let Mairi do as she wished with her if only she let Malina go. "She's only a bairn, Mairi. She doesna deserve any of this. Ye can do as ye please with me. Ye can kill me right the noo, but dinna hurt her. I'm beggin' ye . . . let her go."

Mairi glanced at Malina, who didn't dare move an inch from where Mairi held her. For a moment, Etna thought that she could see regret in her eyes, but whatever she had seen was quickly gone and replaced with nothingness once more. Etna had never seen such a cold, heatless stare. Mairi was so vicious that she seemed almost inhuman to her eyes, lips curling back into a snarl.

"It's a shame, I'll admit that," Mairi said. "I wish I dinna have to kill the bairn. But look at her . . . she looks just like her faither. She has

nothin' of her maither, does she? She looks just like that bastard. And she loves him oh so much. Ye adore yer *Dadaidh*, dinna ye?"

Malina didn't answer Mairi's question, but Mairi didn't seem to be looking for one. "And he adores ye," she continued. "He would do anythin' for ye. Nothin' would break him like the wee one's death."

"How will ye live with yerself?" Etna asked, her tone suddenly just as sharp and ferocious as Mairi's own. "How will ye live with yerself if ye kill an innocent bairn? Do ye have na decency? Do ye have na humanity left in ye?"

Mairi remained silent for a few moments as though she contemplated Etna's question. Then, she took a deep breath, giving Etna a shrug. "I suppose I dinna," she said, and her reply took Etna by surprise. The point of her questions had been to show Mairi that she was insane and that she couldn't simply kill an innocent child. She hadn't expected her to admit that she was a monster. "I wasna always like this, ye ken. I really wasna. Had things happened differently, I would have never dreamt of hurtin' Malina. It's somethin' that I have thought about for a long time, and it was only recently that I decided this is the only way to get what I want."

"And what is it that ye want?" Etna screamed, her voice already hoarse, as tears began to stream down her cheeks, her eyes burning with them. "What is it that ye want that could possibly make this behavior make sense? What is so important to ye that ye would kill a bairn to achieve it?"

Mairi remained silent for a few moments, drawing her bottom lip between her teeth. Then, when she spoke, her voice was only a whisper. "Revenge," she said. "I'm prepared to do anythin' it takes to get me revenge. I'll burn the whole clan down while Finley watches if I must. I'll burn the entire world down."

Etna couldn't stop the gasp that escaped her shocked at how determined and driven Mairi was. The other woman's gaze never wavered, resolve etched all over her expression.

“If I must kill Malina, then so be it,” Mairi said. “If I must kill ye and Lochlan and Arlene and everyone else, then so be it. I willna rest until Finley has lost everythin’. Until he kens that everythin’ he ever held dear is gone. An eye for an eye, right? If ye kent . . . if ye kent what he did to me . . .”

“Weel, I dinna ken,” Etna said. “So why dinna ye tell me? Explain it to me, and maybe then I’ll understand.”

It was a lie, but she didn’t know if Mairi could tell. She doubted that she would ever understand an act as despicable as threatening a mere child with death.

Once again, Etna’s gaze fell on Malina, and she tried to give her a smile to reassure her, though she was certain that it came out as a pained grimace instead. Malina was crying, too, quietly, bulbous tears streaming down her cheeks. The sight made Etna’s skin crawl, and her insides twist themselves in a knot.

Perhaps I can kill her meself. The brigands might end up killin’ me, but that doesna matter as long as Malina can escape. Mairi is strong, but I’m desperate.

Mairi looked at her then, jaw clenching as she spoke through gritted teeth. “He took away me Anna. He murdered her.”

Etna blinked in surprise a few times before she tilted her head to the side with a frown. Had Mairi been that close to Anna? How could that be? Anna had been the Lady of the clan, while Mairi had been nothing but a maid. What could have bonded them so much that Mairi was willing to do anything it took to avenge her death?

Before Etna could ask a single question, though, she heard the unmistakable sound of approaching hooves, and she smiled to herself.

It’s Finley. He has come for us. He has found us.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The moment they approached the lake, Finley could hear the faint sound of voices coming from that area, and he instantly knew that they were on the right track. He couldn't imagine anyone else is out there at that lake so late at night. It must have been Mairi and Etna, though he couldn't tell if there was anyone else.

As long as he heard voices, it meant that Etna was alive, but he didn't know if the same was true for Malina. It was the only thought that had been on his mind ever since they had ridden out of the castle walls, and it had already taken a toll on him. He was already feeling the weight of grief on his shoulders, weighing him down with every passing moment and making it impossible to draw in any air, his lungs burning with it, eyes stinging from the wind and the tears that refused to shed.

But he had to hold onto hope, he kept reminding himself. He couldn't give up on Malina so easily. There would be nothing left for him to fight for if she was dead, and then how would he bring himself to ride on?

"Do ye hear them?" he asked Lochlan, who was still riding by his side, shouting to be heard over the wind. He wanted to make sure that he wasn't the only one who could, that the voices weren't just a figment of his imagination or a whisper of the wind.

"Aye," Lochlan said, confirming it once and for all. His brother's voice was dripping with fury, jaw clenched, and eyes narrowed, his fingers holding onto the reins white-knuckled. He looked murderous, and Finley could hardly blame him for it.

He couldn't imagine what the man was going through. Not only had Finley, his own brother, thought that he was a traitor and a murderer—if anyone, Finley was the traitor himself, he thought, for turning his back on his brother—but now the woman that he had

loved for a long time turned out to be the actual traitor.

Had Mairi ever loved him? Or had it all been an act, just so that she could get the information that she needed?

Finley didn't know which of the two was better, which one would do the least damage to Lochlan. If she did love him, even a little, then perhaps the blow would be lessened. If she didn't, then perhaps Lochlan would have an easier time letting go.

But it would destroy him, no matter what. Anna's betrayal had ruined his entire life, and he didn't want Lochlan to go through the same thing. The man had his entire life ahead of him. He had never had the chance to marry. He didn't have a family. He didn't have a child that could connect him once again to the world, despite his pain.

All he had was Finley and Arlene, and Finley had already let him down.

But na again. Never again.

No matter what happened, Finley would be by his side.

"There they are!" Finley shouted as they made it to the lake. And then he noticed that it wasn't just a couple of figures standing in the dark. Under the light of the torches, he could see a dozen or more figures, all of them too big to be women.

"Brigands!" Lochlan shouted, taking the word right from Finley's lips. With a roar, his brother unsheathed his sword, holding it over his head as he led the charge. "Dinna let any of these bastards escape! Kill them all!"

The cries of the men behind them were deafening in the quiet of the valley, and they were met by more from the opposing side. The brigands were quick to react, each man drawing his own sword as Finley's soldiers jumped off their horses, the frightened animals

rushing to get as far away from the action as they could.

“Malina!” Finley shouted, his gaze searching for her frantically. But there were so many men surrounding him, so many bodies that his chances of spotting her were slim, even if she was right there.

“Dadaidh!”

Malina’s voice was shrill, terrified, but Finley breathed a sigh of relief. She was alive. She was still alive. She hadn’t been harmed.

Finley rushed to the source of the voice, but before he could get too far, a brigand shoved himself in his path, stopping him dead in his tracks. He was a mountain of a man, towering over Finley, but Finley had taken down men like him time and time again.

And this time, rage coursed through him. He was desperate. He would do anything to win.

With a shout, Finley swung his sword, aiming straight for the other man’s head. But the brigand, despite his massive size, was deceptively quick, jumping back in time to avoid Finley’s attack. When he counterattacked, their swords met with a clang, the force of it making Finley’s entire body shake.

Around him, the fight had begun in earnest, men from both sides throwing themselves at each other. The air was filled with screams and the stench of blood, some of them already falling dead.

In every fight, Finley always tried to keep an eye out for his men. He tried to be aware of his surroundings, to rush to their help if he needed to, but now he could hardly tell what was happening around him. The torches provided little light, and the sky was cloudy, obstructing the moon. The darkness was his biggest enemy, but his side wasn’t the only one with the disadvantage.

But the two sides seemed to be evenly matched, much to his frustration. He had always known that the specific group of

brigands that had been plaguing his clan was stronger and more organized than most. It was why they had managed to torment him and the clan for so long. Though they weren't as well trained and disciplined as his own men, they could hold their own in a fight, especially since many of them also had brute strength.

It seemed to Finley as though they only recruited men the size of a bear.

But Finley would kill them. He would kill them all himself if it came to it for what they had done to his clan and now to Malina.

His opponent rushed toward him once more, attacking him with a ferocity that had Finley stumbling backward, trying to avoid his blows. The man swung his sword from side to side, forcing Finley to backtrack as he tried to defend himself, giving him no time and no space to counterattack.

It drove Finley mad. He refused to be bested by a brigand, no matter how much bigger and stronger he was than him.

Though Finley was a tall man, he was quick on his feet, and his slender muscles packing a strength that many underestimated. Ever since he was a boy, he would spend hours practicing with a sword, eager to conquer anyone who could threaten the wellbeing of what was to be his clan.

And though he had mostly kept to the castle in the past few years, refusing to even go out to the training grounds often, his strength hadn't abandoned him.

Nor had his stubbornness.

The thud of the bodies around him, one falling after the other to the ground, never to stand up again, filled him with dread. But he pushed it aside. There would be time to mourn for the fallen soon if those men belonged to his clan. For the moment, he had to focus on the man that kept him from finding Malina.

His breath was ragged, and his body covered in sweat as he attacked once more, bringing his sword up to cut through the brigand's torso. The man parried the blow, and then the next, and even the one after that. Finley soon realized that he couldn't overpower him, so he had to outsmart him. Swinging his sword up, the man rushed to meet his blade, but before he could, Finley spun around him with a speed that left the other man confused. With his back unprotected, there was nothing the brigand could do to save himself from Finley's sword.

Grunting as he moved, Finley pushed his blade through the brigand's back, piercing his flesh. The man's sword fell from his hand, clattering onto the ground, and blood rushed over Finley's hands as he pulled his blade out of the brigand's body. He watched as the man fell onto his knees, choked off sounds escaping his lips, before he collapsed onto his face, finally dead.

Finley's chest heaved as he watched the brigand, waiting for any signs of life. The fight had taken a lot out of him, more than he had expected, but he wasn't done yet. He would keep going, even if the only thing that would push him were his own stubbornness and his refusal to give up.

"Lochlan!" he shouted, searching for the man. The chaos around him had only grown since he had begun fighting the brigand, and it seemed that most men from each side still stood, the fight stretching over what seemed to him like hours but had only been minutes.

When his gaze finally found his brother, he saw him fighting off two of the brigands, and he rushed to his help. They had cornered him, the two of them having an unfair advantage over him, and Finley's heart skipped a beat when he saw them both attacking him.

But Lochlan avoided both their blades, jumping out of harm's way at the last moment. When Finley joined the fight, luring one of the two men away from his brother, Lochlan quickly struck the other down.

“Ye dinna seem so tough noo, do ye?” Finley asked the brigand that remained with a swing of his blade. The man parried his blow and then turned to Lochlan as though he had a personal vendetta against him, ignoring Finley in favor of fighting his brother.

“What did ye do to anger him?” Finley shouted, and Lochlan only had time to give him a shrug before he had to duck to save himself from the man’s sword.

“I dinna ken!” Lochlan shouted. “I seem to anger a lot of people these days!”

Finley huffed out a humorless laugh before throwing himself at the brigand, his boot connecting with the man’s kidney.

He barely flinched.

“Shite,” Finley mumbled as that beast of a man turned to look at him. He suddenly seemed to be angrier at Finley than he was at Lochlan, and he began to stomp toward him, his heavy steps seemingly rattling the entire ground.

But Finley was nothing if not persistent. He decided that the best plan of attack was to strike first, and so he ran toward the brigand, sword held tightly in his hands. At the same time, he saw Lochlan do the same, an angry growl rumbling in his chest.

The brigand seemed uncertain as to whom he should fight first, and Finley watched him falter for a moment. Though that one moment of hesitation was all, he and Lochlan needed to strike him down. The two of them shoved their blades into the man at the same time, Finley into his chest and Lochlan into his back, and soon, the only thing that was holding the brigand upright were those two swords.

Lochlan pulled his blade out of the man with a curse on his lips, prompting Finley to do the same. When he looked around, he saw that many of his men were still standing, still fighting, even though several were injured.

And then, in the chaos that took place around them, his gaze finally came to rest on Malina. She was inconsolable, crying to the point where her face was bright red, reaching for Etna as Mairi held her back. That knife on his daughter's throat made Finley see red, his rage overshadowing anything else.

But he couldn't simply run to Malina. He couldn't risk pushing Mairi into a corner and making her so desperate that she would kill his little girl without a second thought.

It was Etna who was trying to approach them. Instead, her hands outstretched as though she was trying to show Mairi that she wasn't a threat. She seemed to be speaking to her, though Finley couldn't hear what she was saying over the sounds of the battle, the cacophony of swords and screams so loud that it encompassed everything else, drowning it out. But as she was speaking, she took step after step, closing the distance between them, and Mairi didn't seem to notice.

Clever lass.

Perhaps if Etna managed to distract Mairi long enough, he and Lochlan could rescue Malina from her and capture her simultaneously. But when he turned to look at Lochlan, he found him pallid, hands shaking around the hilt of his sword.

"Lochlan," Finley said, his tone commanding to pull him out of his thoughts, "this isna the time for this. Dinna let her make ye do somethin' that ye'll regret."

As he spoke, Finley lay a heavy hand on Lochlan's shoulder, trying to calm him. It had been a long time since he had last seen him so angry, and he had forgotten how alike they could sometimes be.

Finley could hardly control his own anger, struggling to keep it at bay and think rationally. But at that moment, he had to be the voice of reason. He had to make sure that Lochlan wouldn't do something reckless and get himself killed, along with everyone else.

The change in him was visible when he began to calm himself, and Finley let go of the breath that he had been holding.

“How will we get Malina?” Lochlan asked him, and Finley had no good answer.

“I dinna ken. Perhaps—”

But his words were cut short when one of the brigands came stumbling toward Mairi and Malina, dazed from his injuries. His sword was still dangling from his hand, swinging dangerously close to the two of them, and Finley rushed toward them, panic gripping him.

But he was far, so far from him.

I canna reach him. I canna reach him in time.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The battle began before Etna could even move. Finley and his men threw themselves at the brigands the moment they reached them, showing no hesitation, giving them no time to escape. And the moment that they arrived, was the moment Etna saw the fear in Mairi's eyes.

Up until that moment, she had been cocky, acting like there was no stopping her. She had been confident in her plan, and that confidence had frightened Etna, to the point where she had thought that perhaps there was no hope for her and Malina after all.

But Finley's presence emboldened her. Now that he was there, along with his trusted men, she didn't think that Mairi and the brigands stood a chance.

She was still scared. Scared of what the brigands could do to her, scared of Mairi and her ruthless desire to kill. But she swallowed her fear, knowing that there wouldn't be a better time to bring Malina to safety.

"Mairi . . . be rational," she told her, raising her voice so that the other woman would hear her over the sounds of the battle. "What will ye do noo, hmm? There's nowhere to go. Ye canna run. Ye canna fight. Whatever ye do, Finley will find ye. But if ye let go of Malina, maybe he'll spare yer life."

Mairi's gaze had been fixed on the battle for several seconds, and she only turned to look at Etna after she had finished speaking to her. For a moment, she said nothing, nor did she move.

And then she laughed.

Etna frowned at the sound, high and bright and full of mirth, as

though what she had said was an absolutely ridiculous notion.

“Do ye really think I care what happens to me?” Mairi asked. “Ye’re a fool, Etna. I already told ye, Finley took everythin’ from me. I have nothin’ to live for. If I’m to die, then so be it, but first, I’ll make sure he watches as I kill everyone he loves.”

As she spoke, Mairi pressed the knife against Malina’s skin, and the words tumbled out of Etna’s mouth before she could even think them through.

“Wait!” she shouted, startling Mairi enough to put a halt to her actions. “Ye . . . ye havena explained anythin’ to me. I dinna understand. Were ye . . . were ye friends with Anna?”

Mairi blinked a few times, tilting her head to the side as she regarded Etna. “Somethin’ like that,” she said. But just as she opened her mouth to speak again, Etna saw one of the brigands stumble toward her, injured and disoriented.

And she saw the terror on Mairi’s face.

It was her chance, perhaps the only chance that she would get. When she saw Mairi’s grip slacken around Malina, she closed the gap between them, grabbing the little girl by the arm and pulling her as far away from Mairi as she could.

But Mairi was quick to shove the brigand away from her with a grunt, going as far as to stab him with her knife, adding to his injuries.

And then, she turned to face Etna.

She had never seen such a cold stare on another person before. There had been a time when she had seen ruthless stares from Finley, but those were nothing compared to the total lack of humanity that she saw in Mairi’s eyes.

“Malina, run to *Dadaidh*,” Etna told her in a hushed voice, gently pushing her toward Finley’s direction. “Go. Go noo.”

Malina didn’t need to be told twice. She ran to her father, jumping into his arms, even though he was covered in blood. Etna watched them for only a moment, seeing the relief in Finley’s face, the happiness at having his daughter back in his arms, safe. But she didn’t have much time to feel relief, not when Mairi came at her with a roar, holding the knife high above her head to strike the strongest blow she could.

Etna couldn’t help but scream, terror gripping her. But her feet were quick to react, and she began to run before she could even realize it, trying to put as much distance between herself and Mairi.

“Etna!”

Finley’s voice cut through the noise of the battle, and when she glanced at him, she saw that he had given Malina to Lochlan and that he was rushing toward her.

He’ll protect me. I ken that he will.

But Finley was far from her, and Mairi was quickly closing the distance between them, her long legs helping her to keep up with Etna as she ran. Seeing a wall of bushes, Etna jumped behind them, crawling on the ground to get even further while staying hidden.

The soil was rough under her palms, twigs and pebbles pushing into her skin, but she would be lucky if she escaped with only a few scrapes and bruises.

“Do ye wish to ken the whole truth, Etna?” Mairi asked, but Etna didn’t answer. She couldn’t lure her out that easily. “Weel, I’ll tell ye . . . I loved Anna, and she loved me. Na . . . we were *in love*.”

Etna pressed a hand over her mouth to muffle the gasp of surprise at Mairi’s confession. But Mairi was so lost in her memories, it

seemed to her, that she wouldn't have noticed either way.

"Watchin' her suffer every day by Finley's side, kennin' that all she wanted was to be with me was unbearable. She couldna stand the bastard. And when Malina was born, Anna loved her. Och aye, she did, even if she was always just like Finley since she was a wee bairn," Mairi said. "But it only made me hate Finley more. Every time I saw them, every time I saw her pretend that she loved him, it made me sick to me stomach. He could be with her, and everyone was happy about them, but me? If anyone had found out about us, they would've stoned us to death. I had to love her from afar, and it killed me. Imagine the shame of it all. Imagine how suffocatin' it was to ken that we had to hide.

"It went on for years. Years, Etna. I had to watch the woman I love be with someone else for years. And Anna was na different, ye ken. She hated Finley just as much as I do, though I'll tell ye this much. He was a good man before her death. I canna deny that. He treated her weel. But that wasna enough for either of us.

"And then one day, we decided that there was only one way out of it. We had to kill Finley. Ye see it was all Anna's idea. She was a woman, and Malina was a wee lassie, so na one would burden either of them with any responsibility. The lairdship would go to Lochlan, and I would take Anna and Malina away, somewhere where na one would ken who we were. Perhaps people would suspect us, but they'd have na proof. We would just be two widows helpin' each other, and even if we would still have to hide, at least she wouldna have to pretend she loved Finley. We would be happy."

As she spoke those last words, Mairi's voice wavered, and Etna could almost feel the pain that she was feeling, her tone so raw and full of emotion that she couldn't believe it was the same woman who had tried to kill her so mercilessly.

"But the bastard had to fight back," Mairi continued. "And he killed her. He almost killed me, too. He took the only person I ever loved from me. And noo . . . weel, perhaps I canna finish me plan. I canna

kill Malina or Lochlan or Arlene. But I can kill his lover, just like he killed mine.”

Etna’s rage bubbled over inside her, her hands curling into fists. She had had enough of Mairi’s insane revenge. She had lost people, too, and though no one had murdered her mother, no one had murdered Anna, either. Finley had only acted in self-defense, and it had broken him. Could Mairi not see that? Could she not see that he had become a different person after Anna’s death?

She couldn’t understand how Mairi could be so selfish and so blind. Out of the two of them, she was the murderer, not Finley. She had been the one who had caused the deaths of dozens. And Anna had been the one who had caused her own death.

She didn’t want to listen to Mairi anymore. She didn’t want to hide from her anymore, to cower in some bushes and wait for Finley to save her. She was afraid. Of course, she was. But her fear wouldn’t stop her from saving herself.

It wouldn’t stop her from giving Mairi what she deserved.

With a grunt, Etna pushed herself off the ground, her hands colliding with Mairi’s shoulders. She put all of her force into them, shoving her back and making her stumble, the knife falling from her hand onto the ground. And as she fell, she tried to reach for Etna, to grab onto something, anything that could hold her upright, but Etna stepped back from her, not letting her touch her.

But when Mairi’s head collided with a rock that lay on the ground, the sight drew a shocked gasp out of Etna. She was frozen in place, watching with horror as Mairi came to the realization that she had been severely injured, blood seeping from the back of her head all around her.

“Etna!” Finley’s shout came just as he grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling her close to his chest. “Are ye alright?”

But Etna could hardly hear him over the sound of her blood rushing

to her ears as she looked at Mairi. Mairi was looking right back at her, but she seemed confused, as though she didn't know exactly what had happened or she had already forgotten.

"W-what . . ." Mairi said quietly, her hand reaching up to touch her head but not getting quite where it should be. "What happened?"

Etna didn't know what to say. Even after all the pain that Mairi had caused, she couldn't help but sympathize with her in her last moments. She wanted to comfort her, to make her death a little easier, a little less scary, but Finley wouldn't let her move from his arms.

Even if he did, Etna didn't know if she could take a single step.

It was only moments later when Mairi took one last, shuddering breath before her head lolled to the side, her eyes going blank.

"Is she . . ." Etna asked Finley, her voice trailing off. She already knew the answer to her question.

Mairi wasn't moving at all. Of course, she was dead. Etna didn't have to check.

"Come," Finley told her, trying to pull her away from Mairi's body. When Etna followed him, she saw that the battle had died down around them for the first time. How long had it been since it had ended? She hadn't even noticed, too wrapped up in her own fear and fight to care about what was happening around her.

It seemed like Finley's men had won. Most of the brigands were killed, while a few were captured, and as Etna looked at the bodies on the ground, she couldn't see any familiar faces. There were many injured, though, and the stench of blood lingered in her nostrils.

"Malina . . . where is she?" Etna asked, panic rushing through her suddenly. Finley didn't have to answer her. Malina ran to her, her arms wrapping tightly around her, and Etna scooped her up into her

arms, holding her close.

Tears of relief fell down her cheeks. It was over. It was all over, and Malina was safe.

“Etna, did Mairi harm ye?” Finley asked, his hands patting her arms and torso as though he was trying to find traces of blood. “Are ye alright?”

“I’m fine,” Etna assured him. She was only tired, and she wanted to sleep for a whole day. All her energy had been drained out of her, both physically and emotionally. “She dinna harm me, Finley. I’m fine.”

Finley only seemed to be satisfied once he had personally ensured that Etna had no injuries. But Etna didn’t worry about herself. There was someone else who needed their worry more than she did.

Lochlan was standing over Mairi’s body, his entire frame shaking. He didn’t move. All he did was look at Mairi as though he couldn’t believe his own eyes, his hands reaching out only to fall back by his sides once more.

“Ye should take him back to the castle,” Etna told Finley. “He shouldna be around her noo.”

“Aye, ye’re right,” Finley said, reluctantly leaving her side. Etna watched them from a short distance, not wanting to intrude.

Finley placed a hand on Lochlan’s shoulder, gently pulling him away from Mairi’s body without saying a word. At first, Lochlan resisted him, trying to shrug off Finley’s hand, but after Finley gave him another push, he began to walk away toward the horses that two of the men had already gathered.

A part of him seemed to have died with Mairi, and Etna could hardly stand to look at him when he was so broken. The Lochlan she knew was always full of life and mirth, and Mairi had stolen all

that from him.

Will he be like Finley, noo? Will he go down the same path?

Etna didn't want that for him, but she didn't know what she could possibly do to stop it. Somehow, she had managed to help Finley, but she knew he would never be the same again. The same was bound to be true for Lochlan.

"Etna, will ye go with him?" Finley asked her, running a hand through his hair and messing it up even more. It stood up, wild and almost comical, and Etna would have laughed had the situation not been so dire. "I must stay here with the rest of me men. But I trust ye to take Lochlan and Malina back."

"I dinna need a governess," Lochlan grumbled before he gave his horse a nudge and began to ride back to the castle, leaving Etna and Finley to watch him in concern.

"Please watch over him," Finley said. Etna couldn't even rejoice in the fact that Finley had finally come to his senses and that he wasn't blaming Lochlan anymore. He seemed to have been torn apart by the events of the day, too, and Etna worried about him just as much as she worried about Finley and Malina. "I ken that it's all over but . . . but keep Malina with ye at all times."

Etna didn't need to be told to keep the little girl close. She doubted that she would let her out of her sight again any time soon.

"I'll take care of them both, Finley," she said. "I promise."

Etna wanted nothing more than to grab him and kiss him, but she didn't want to do it in front of everyone else, especially Malina, who was still in her arms. Instead, she settled for a nod before she placed Malina on the horse Finley handed to her, riding off to the castle.

"Etna . . . I'm scared," Malina said, the first words she had spoken

after the entire ordeal.

Etna held her tightly against her chest as they rode, leaning down to press a kiss on the top of her head.

“There’s nothin’ to be afraid of anymore,” she told her. “I’ll keep ye safe.”

Chapter Thirty

Etna caught up with Lochlan just as the man made it to the front gates of the castle. Lochlan had been riding so fast that Etna didn't dare match his speed with Malina on the saddle. He was like a man possessed, and it seemed to her as though he didn't want to lay eyes upon another human.

So, Etna left him alone, not speaking to him as they dismounted their horses. She could respect that Lochlan needed space and that she would only make things worse if she tried to make him feel better.

He needs to be on his own for noo. There's nothin' I can do to help him.

But even though Etna thought that the best course of action was to leave him be for a while, Arlene seemed to have a different opinion. Of course, Etna couldn't blame her. She didn't know what had happened down at the lake.

Etna saw Arlene rush out of the castle, her legs carrying her with a surprising speed for her age. When she got to them, she grabbed Malina, a sob of relief bursting out of her. Then, once she had reassured herself that Malina was safe, she urged her to go into the castle and to her chambers.

Once she was gone, Arlene turned to look at Etna and Lochlan, looking at them both with the same concerned look she had given Malina.

"Are ye two alright?" she asked. "Where is Finley? What happened?"

Etna glanced at Lochlan, but the man wouldn't even look at Arlene. He shook his head quietly before he began to walk away, despite

Arlene's protests.

"Lochlan!" she called after him. "Where are ye goin'? What happened?"

"Wait," Etna said, placing a gentle hand on Arlene's shoulder. "I'll tell ye everythin'. Let him go. He needs some time."

Arlene frowned at her in that way that always had Etna telling her everything. She led her inside the castle with that hand on her shoulder and asked one of the servants to bring them some tea, but Arlene was quick to interrupt.

"It doesna seem like a night for tea," she said. "Bring the whiskey."

As they sat in the drawing-room, Etna tried to find the right words to explain everything that had happened to Arlene. She had already gone through enough excitement for one day, and at her age, she didn't want to upset her any further. But as she told her everything, Arlene kept her composure. By the end of it all, she seemed relieved over everything else.

"At least everyone is safe," she said. "And Finley can stop worryin' about those brigands."

"Arlene . . . did ye ken?" Etna asked, too curious for her own good. "Did ye ken about Anna's death?"

"If ye're askin' if I kent that Finley killed her, then aye," she said. "He never told me the entire story. I only kent that he killed her and that it wasna his fault. I never doubted it. He really did love that woman. He could have never done any harm to her out of malice."

Etna remained silent, not knowing what to say. A part of her wished that she could have known Finley before he had changed before his marriage to Anna, and her death had turned him into a completely different person. But she had also grown to love the man he was

now, and she couldn't imagine anyone different.

"Ye're doin' him a lot of good," Arlene told her then, with a small smile on her lips. "He has changed verra much since ye first came here. Noo, if only there was someone like that for Lochlan . . . it seems like the lad will need it. Weel, Etna . . . did ye ken?"

"About Mairi and Lochlan?" Etna asked, and when Arlene nodded, she hesitated, unsure of what to say. But if she lied to her, Arlene would know. She always knew. "Aye, I did. I saw them together once, and then Lochlan told me everythin'. But had I kent about her, I—"

"Ye couldna have kent," Arlene said. "Na one could. We all thought that Mairi was a good lass. She wouldna have been the best match for Lochlan, but I would be more inclined to allow him to marry her than to marry him off to some of the noble lasses."

Etna didn't miss how Arlene spoke about permission, and she didn't doubt that even though Finley was the Laird, she had plenty of influence over what the two brothers did, especially in their personal lives. But she doubted that what Lochlan needed at that moment was another woman, and she hoped that she wouldn't meddle right away.

"Weel, I think it's time for me to retire for the night," Arlene said after knocking back the rest of her whiskey. "Goodnight, dear. And thank ye."

Etna was too surprised by the way Arlene had knocked back half the bottle of whiskey while the two of them were talking to wonder what she could have possibly thanked her for. She had done what anyone would have done. She didn't need a thank you.

Tired as she was, she decided to head to her chambers too, but the moment her head hit the pillow, she found it impossible to sleep. Her mind was swarming with thoughts, replaying what had happened that night over and over. She tossed and turned, but no matter how much she tried, sleep evaded her. And so, the gentle

knock on her door made her sit upright with a frown, worry brewing inside her at the thought that something else had happened.



* * *

When Finley returned to the castle after rounding up the prisoners and helping with the injured men, he cleaned himself up, washed the blood off his skin, and then tried to sleep. But the excitement of the day was still lingering over him, making it impossible to rest.

Hesitantly, he made his way to Etna's chambers, knocking softly on her door to not wake her if she was already asleep. But the door soon opened, and Etna stood before him, looking radiant even after everything she had been through.

Finley immediately pulled her into his arms, letting his head fall on her shoulder. For a moment, Etna seemed to not know what to do, but then her arms wrapped around him, pulling him into the room.

When their lips met, Finley's shoulders relaxed, and he closed his eyes with a sigh, finally feeling at ease. He rested his forehead against Etna's own, laughing when she went cross-eyed, looking at him.

"What's so funny, me Laird?" Etna asked, but there was a smile on her lips, too, though only for a moment. When it disappeared, it was replaced by a concern that Finley hated seeing on her face.

If only I could take all her worries away like she took mine.

Of course, he knew that it wasn't that simple. He, too, was still worried, about Malina, about Lochlan, and about Etna. They had all been through so much that day, and Finley didn't know how long it would take for all of them to recover. But he was determined to be by their sides, to protect Etna and Malina and make amends with Lochlan.

"Is everyone alright?" Etna asked. "The wounded?"

"The healer is tendin' to them all," Finley assured her as the two of them sat on the edge of her bed. "He says they will all recover. We dinna have any dead on our side. And with the brigands that we captured, it's only a matter of time before we find whoever is left."

Finley wasn't convinced that all the brigands had been there that night. He was certain that there were many more of them, and he wouldn't stop until all of them were captured or dead.

"And Lochlan?" Finley asked. "Ye came back with him, did ye na?"

"Aye, I did," Etna said. "But I havena seen him since then. I thought that it would be best if I gave him some time."

"I suppose that is for the best," Finley agreed. He would talk to him before long, but as things were, he wanted to give him some time to mourn. Despite everything that Mairi had done, love wasn't something that Lochlan could simply stop feeling. Finley had gone through the very same thing.

"What about ye?" Etna asked as though she could read his thoughts. "After everythin', ye heard . . ."

Her voice trailed off and her gaze held such sorrow that Finley leaned closer, trying to kiss it away. After all, he had never been good at talking, and kissing was better than discussing something that painful. But Etna quickly pulled back, cupping his cheek with her hand and giving him an insistent look.

“Tell me,” she said. “Ye canna hide how ye feel forever, Finley. It’s na good for ye.”

Shrugging a shoulder, Finley fell back onto the bed, stretching his arms over his head. It had been a while since he had last let his guard down like that around another person, but it felt good to do so. It felt natural with Etna.

“I dinna ken,” he said. “It all sounds like a nightmare. To find out that Anna wasna the person I thought she was at all . . . I always wondered why she turned against me, but I couldna have thought that she had hated me for so long. I thought . . . I thought that she loved me; I truly did. But I suppose I was wrong. Our entire relationship was a lie.”

Etna couldn’t even begin to imagine the kind of burden that realization could have placed on Finley. At least now, it seemed that he had some sort of closure, the answers he had gotten from Mairi explaining everything that he needed to know.

“To be honest, I had often wondered if there was someone else,” Finley admitted with a sigh. “I thought perhaps she could love two people at once, but . . . if she had told me, I would have understood. Or at least I’d like to think I would. I loved her, and if I couldna make her happy but someone else could, then I’d let her go. Even if that someone was Mairi. It would have been difficult for them, but perhaps I could have helped them if she had told me. Perhaps we could have . . .”

Finley’s voice trailed off, and Etna could see the gears turning in his mind, trying to find a solution for something that was long over. “Dinna think about that noo,” she said. “Ye’re only torturin’ yerself.”

“At least it was a relief to hear that she loved Malina,” Finley continued, not addressing Etna’s concerns. “Malina loved her, too. She loved her dearly. I remember the two of them bein’ inseparable. I dinna ken what I would do if I found out that she hated her own bairn as much as she hated me.”

Etna placed a hand on Finley's shoulder with a soft sigh, nodding slowly. "I'm sorry this happened to ye, Finley," she said. "I wish I could make it better."

"Ye do," Finley said, turning to look at her with a small, hesitant smile. "Ye really do, Etna. Ye came here, and ye changed everythin'. Ye changed me. Just bein' around ye makes me a happier man. So, dinna think that ye need to do anything else."

Finley's words startled Etna. She had never expected to hear such an admission from him, but that only made the confession that much sweeter. Pulling him closer, she gave him a short, chaste kiss, but before she could pull back, Finley claimed her lips once more, that kiss more intense than the one before.

Finley cupped Etna's cheek with his hand, looking right into her eyes when he pulled back. "I have another confession to make," he said, but then he remained silent for what seemed like eons to Etna. She wanted to ask him what it was, to push him, but she stopped herself, knowing that he would tell her once he was ready. "I . . . I love ye, Etna. I didna want to admit it for a verra long time, but I can finally admit it noo. I love ye."

Etna's chest tightened, her jaw-dropping at Finley's confession. It must have taken her a long time to react, she thought, because he began to pull away, and she could see that he was instantly building those walls around him once more, his expression becoming unreadable.

But she stopped him before he could get too far, her hand shooting out to grip his arm. "I love ye, too," she said. "I never thought I'd hear those words from ye, Finley. Forgive me for bein' startled, but I'm tellin' ye the truth. I do love ye. So, so much."

Etna thought for a moment that Finley wouldn't believe her, at least at first. She wouldn't blame him for it. He had already been through so much that it was only natural he would be careful. But then he smiled, giving her the widest smile she had ever seen on his face, and pulled her on top of him, making her squeal in surprise.

“Will ye stay the night?” Etna asked him, aching to have him close after everything that had happened. With Finley around, she felt safer, as though nothing and no one could touch her.

Finley glanced at Etna’s fists that were curled around the fabric of his shirt, clinging onto him almost desperately. He nodded, perhaps realizing that she felt safer with him around, and the two of them got under the covers, Finley pulling Etna against his chest. She laid her head on his shoulder, her fingers tracing patterns on his skin until she finally began to fall asleep, her eyes getting heavier with every breath that she took.

Before darkness encompassed her, she heard Finley whisper those three words to her once more, and when she slept, she did so with a smile on her lips.

Epilogue

If someone had told Etna only a few months prior that she would be marrying Finley that year, she would have laughed in their face, the notion being too ridiculous. And yet there she was, being stuffed into the tightest corset she had ever worn in her life by three maids who had made it their mission to torture her that day, it seemed so that she would not only be the Lady of the clan but also look the part.

Finley had asked for her hand in marriage not long after the incident at the lake, and Etna had been more than happy to accept, as was her father. If anything, she had a suspicion that her father was even more excited about the whole thing than she was.

Planning a wedding as a Laird's bride-to-be had proven to be a much more difficult task than she could have ever imagined, but Arlene had helped her every step of the way. Or perhaps that was too generous, she thought. Rather, Arlene had taken over the preparations and only asked for her opinion when she couldn't make up her mind on her own.

But Etna had no issues with that. Planning a wedding was hardly a skill that she possessed, and she preferred to continue her duty of teaching Malina. Now that she would officially be her daughter, she didn't want to pass her on to another tutor. She loved teaching her too much.

Once the maids were done dressing her, it was time to do her hair, and they began to brush and pull at it, sticking pins in it that stabbed her head. Etna bore it all, though, knowing that in the end, it would be worth it. While she didn't particularly care if she looked regal, she knew that the rest of the clan would, and she didn't want their first impression of her as the Lady of the clan to be wrapped up in disappointment.

Once they were finished, Etna looked at herself in the mirror, smiling at her reflection. She had to admit that they had done a stellar job, truly making her look as though she was royalty. The red fabric of her dress was eye-catching, vibrant, embellished with golden details, and the lace that surrounded the hem and the edges of her sleeves was the most intricate she had ever seen.

“Ach . . . I never thought I’d see ye like this.”

Dougal’s voice came from the open door of her chambers, and Etna turned her head to frown at him. “What do ye mean?” she asked. “Why na?”

“Weel, ye were always so interested in books,” Dougal said. “I thought ye were more interested in them than in findin’ a husband.”

“Faither!” Etna said, though there was no bite in her tone. “Ye’re verra interested in books, and yet ye managed to marry *Mamaidh* somehow.”

“Aye. I dinna even ken how I managed that meself.”

Her father approached her with a smile, and Etna threw herself in his arms, hugging him tightly. Now it was certain that she wouldn’t be going to Edinburgh with him. Her father had already moved there and had just managed to get himself comfortable when Etna had sent him the invitation to the wedding. She had missed him terribly, even though they had only been apart from a few months, and she didn’t know how she could spend the rest of her life only seeing him every now and then.

“Are ye certain that ye dinna wish to stay here with me?” she asked. “Ye ken that ye’d be more than welcome. Finley would love to have ye here. I would love to have ye here.”

“Perhaps one day, lass,” Dougal said. “For noo, I think I’ll stay in Edinburgh. I had forgotten how much I enjoy teachin’. But when I’m wrinkly and old, and ye have to take care of me, I promise ye, I’ll come be here with ye.”

Etna rolled her eyes at Dougal, but he was quick to press a finger on her lips, hushing her before she could say anything else. "It's time to go, Etna," he said. "The Laird is waitin' for ye."

And so did the rest of the clan, she knew. Dread coursed through her at the thought that she would have to declare her love in front of everyone. It seemed so intimate, and her cheeks heated, her stomach tying itself in a knot.

It's alright. I can do this. Finley will be right there.

Dougal offered his arm to Etna. She took it gratefully, as her knees had already begun to wobble, and she didn't trust herself to walk all alone to the chapel. But with her father on her side, she mustered all the courage that she could and prepared herself for what was to come.

When they made it there, the first thing that Etna saw was that there were too many people. It seemed to her as though the entire clan was there, waiting just for her, and she blushed at all the attention when every pair of eyes turned to look at her. When her gaze fell on Finley, though, she found him smiling at her, a small, shy smile that was so unlike him; Etna couldn't help but wonder what was going through his mind.

She smiled back at him, though her smile was shaky, anxiety and embarrassment crawling through her and making her avert her gaze from everyone around her. She only found herself relaxing when she finally made it to Finley, and he took her hands in his, giving them an encouraging squeeze.

It was as though a weight lifted from her shoulders, and she could suddenly breathe again; Finley's proximity was all she needed to feel at ease.

The ceremony was finished before long, and Etna didn't even realize that it had come to an end until she and Finley were walking to the great hall for the feast. The tables had already been laid with a feast for the entire clan, their legs almost creaking under the

weight of the plates. The wine flowed freely, and the guests who were pouring in were helping themselves, all of them eager to celebrate their marriage.

But Etna couldn't wait to be alone with Finley. She had something important to tell him, but she supposed it would have to wait until the end of the night.

"Are ye happy?" Finley asked her as they walked to their table at the far end of the room, and Etna nodded, her chest almost bursting with happiness. "Aye, I am," she said. "Are ye?"

"Of course," Finley said. "I have everythin' I ever needed."

"Etna!" Malina screamed, running to her and climbing into her lap after she had taken her seat. She had adjusted well, it seemed to Etna, to the idea that she was marrying her father, and she had brought no objections to their wedding. If anything, she was probably as excited about it as Dougal was.

Etna was glad about it. She didn't know what she would have done if Malina had raised any objections, as the last thing she wanted to do was push her toward the behavior that she had when the two of them had first met. But she reminded herself that there was no need to worry about that. Malina loved her, and she loved Malina more than anything in the world.

As the feast progressed, Etna noticed that Finley was getting more and more restless. Malina was off playing with the other children, Dougal was busy talking to Arlene, and Lochlan was nowhere to be found, so he and Etna were mostly left alone with each other, and she could see that there was something that he wanted to tell her.

"What is it?" she urged, unable to handle any more of his foot tapping. At her question, she saw Finley falter for a moment, but then he leaned closer with a conspiratorial smile on his lips.

"Do ye want to go to our chambers?" he asked. "I think we can have much more fun there than here."

Etna didn't need to be asked twice. She tried to stand from her seat as subtly as she could, but the rest of the people in the room weren't paying much attention to her or Finley anymore, most of them too drunk to care about anything other than dancing and chattering excitedly. Etna made her way through the crowd, followed by Finley, who kept a respectful distance from her, at least until they were out of the room, and no one could see them. The moment they were truly alone, he was on her, hands roaming all over her body as they went up the stairs.

"Finley!" Etna chastised him, slapping his hand away when it grabbed her buttocks. "Wait until we get to the room."

"I canna resist ye, lass," he told her, a growl rumbling in his chest as he grabbed her by the hips and pushed her against the nearest wall. Etna's eyes rolled to the back of her head, pleasure coursing through her as Finley mouthed at her neck, sucking and nibbling on her skin. "I've wanted to do this all night."

Etna groaned in response, her hands reaching out to pull him closer. They were past the stairs, and so they would know if someone approached before they would see them, and that gave her the peace of mind that she needed to surrender herself to him, one leg coming up to wrap around his hips.

Finley was ravenous, kissing her jaw, her neck, her chest, tongue dipping just under the collar of her dress to taste her, his hands eagerly tugging the fabric down. But it seemed as though it wasn't enough for him, judging by the frustrated noises he was making.

Within moments, Etna found herself being spun around, palms colliding with the wall. She rested her forehead against it as Finley began to work on her laces, all but ripping her dress apart in his haste until the top part of it hung loosely around her torso. Finley's hands came to cup her bare breasts, and the moan that escaped him had Etna answering with one of her own.

She wanted to feel him inside her. Nothing else would be enough for her.

“Finley . . . please,” she whispered, biting her bottom lip to stay quiet, even though she knew that no one would hear him over the noises of the crowd in the great hall.

“Please what, lass?” Finley asked. “I want to hear ye say it.”

“Take me,” she told him, as her hands boldly grabbed her skirt, pulling it up as far as it would go. She pushed her hips back, gasping when the air hit her bare buttocks. For a moment, Finley didn’t move, nor did he make a single sound. But then he moaned as though he could hardly stand what Etna was doing to him, and his hands disappeared from her breasts only to reappear on her thighs as he fell to his knees behind her.

His lips trailed kisses over her thighs while his fingers explored her entrance, dipping between her folds. The first touch had Etna gasping with pleasure, legs falling further apart as a silent invitation for more.

When his fingers finally breached her, her entire body jerked, her hips chasing the feeling of him inside her.

“Turn around,” Finley said, his voice low and commanding. “Keep your skirt up.”

The moment his fingers were out of her, Etna let out a soft whine but did as she was told and was instantly rewarded with Finley’s lips on that spot that made a million lights erupt behind her eyelids. His tongue darted out, teasing her sensitive flesh, and his fingers joined his efforts once more, plunging deep inside of her.

Etna’s head fell back, her lips parted, her breath coming out in short bursts. Her knuckles were tight as she held onto her skirt with all her strength, the pleasure that coursed through her so intense she almost ripped it in two.

Finley looked at her with hunger in his eyes as he pleased her. Etna could only guess what she looked like in the middle of that corridor, with her dress torn open and her skirt around her hips, the

skin all over her body flushed a bright pink.

With every flick of Finley's tongue, Etna was pushed closer and closer to the edge, heat pooling low in her belly. She could feel the familiar stirrings of her climax, and one of her hands reached for Finley's hair, fingers tangling through it and pulling him even closer.

Finley seemed happy to give her everything that she wanted, working her sensitive spot. His breathing was just as heavy as her own, and Etna could hardly believe that man enjoyed pleasuring her so much.

"Oh, Finley . . . dinna stop," she begged, her words turning into a low, continuous moan as he pushed her over the edge, her entire body pulsing with the force of her orgasm, her eyes falling shut and plunging her in the warm darkness.

When she opened her eyes, Finley was already on his feet, his hands grabbing her waist and pulling her close. "I'm na finished with ye yet," he said, as he pulled her toward his chambers—no, their chambers, she corrected herself—the two of them stumbling their way there as they tried to rid each other of their clothes.

Once they were behind closed doors, Finley undressed her completely, throwing her clothes in a pile on the floor. His own followed soon after, and once he was naked, Etna couldn't stop herself from wrapping her fingers around his manhood, eager to feel him.

Finley had been hungry for her all night, his desire urging him to rush, but at that moment, he slowed down, kissing her sweetly. Etna parted her lips, tasting herself on his tongue as he pushed her toward the bed. She went easily, lying down on the mattress and pulling him on top of her, never once breaking their kiss.

When Finley braced himself, Etna's breath hitched, and she waited in anticipation as he guided himself between her folds. At the first thrust of his hips, she screamed his name, hands coming to rest on

his shoulders and fingers digging into his flesh, looking for something to anchor her.

Finley was a beast, claiming her just like Etna wanted him to. She could feel him so deep inside her, her own hips rolling to meet his own, each movement drawing another breathless moan out of her. When Finley grabbed her legs, pulling them over his shoulders, Etna knew that she wouldn't last long once more.

And Finley seemed to be thinking the same as he claimed her lips again, folding her in half and pushing into her just the way he knew she liked, eager to bring her to completion once more. Etna kissed him, arms wrapping around his neck to keep him close, the force of Finley's thrusts pushing her further up the bed.

There was nothing gentle about either of them, but Etna knew there would be plenty of time for that later. At that moment, she wanted to feel like she belonged to him like Finley couldn't help but claim her as his own, drunk with desire. Their hands grabbed anything they could reach, Finley's own on her breasts as he sat up on his knees, the new angle leaving Etna screaming.

Her second climax rushed over her, making every muscle in her body stiffen before she finally relaxed, her pleasure washing away everything else. She was oversensitive, her body throbbing and tingling with the aftermath of her orgasm, but she wanted nothing more than to see Finley fall apart for her.

It didn't take long for him to follow her, giving her a few sharp thrusts as he reached his own zenith, Etna's name on his lips as he spilled himself inside of her.

The two of them stayed like that for a few moments, Finley panting over her as he tried to catch his breath. He collapsed on top of Etna with a breathless laugh, and she couldn't help but laugh, too, giddy with it all.

She loved that man with every part of her. She couldn't imagine anything better than being his wife.

Finley trailed kisses on her skin wherever he could reach without moving, exhaustion clearly catching up with him. Etna pushed him off her, his weight making it difficult to breathe, and then she snuggled into his arms, tucking her face in the crook of his neck.

“Finley . . . I have somethin’ to tell ye,” she said. He hummed sleepily, and Etna poked him hard in the ribs, making him jump.

“What are ye doin’, woman?” he demanded, hand rubbing roughly over his ribs. “What’s so important that ye must tell me right the noo?”

Etna pulled back just enough to look at him, smiling so wide that her cheeks began to hurt. “I’m pregnant,” she said. She took Finley’s hand in her own, guiding it on her belly, even though she knew that it was too early to feel anything. “In a few months, I’ll have yer bairn.”

Finley’s drowsiness was replaced by complete alertness. His eyes widened as he looked at Etna, mouth opening as though he was going to speak before he shut it once more.

“A-are ye serious?” he asked. “We’re havin’ a bairn?”

“Aye,” Etna said. “I’m completely serious.”

Etna laid a hand on Finley’s chest. She could feel his heartbeat so fast that she was afraid his heart would give in. But then he grabbed her and kissed her, pressing kiss after kiss all over her face.

“Finley!” she shouted, giggling. “Stop it!”

He did as he was told, but not before pressing a kiss on her lips. “That is the best news I’ve heard in a while,” he said. “I can hardly believe it.”

Etna could hardly believe it, too. It had all happened so fast, but with the frequency of their encounters, it was no wonder she was

already with child. She had proven to be just as insatiable as Finley was, the two of them stealing moments together whenever they could.

“I love ye, *mo ghràdh*,” he whispered to her. He sounded so raw, so sincere that Etna’s breath hitched in her throat. “I love ye and our wee bairns.”

Etna smiled at the thought that Malina was her child now, too, and at the thought that Finley saw it as such. She knew that she couldn’t replace Anna. Even though she had been a horrible woman and had brought Finley nothing but heartache, she had loved Malina, and she and Finley both wanted her to know that. But that didn’t mean that Etna couldn’t be a mother to her, too.

“Are ye happy?” Etna asked him, echoing his question from earlier that night.

“Aye,” Finley said. “I’m the happiest man in the world.”

The End?

But there's more...

Eager to learn what the future holds for **Etna and Finley**?

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Afterword

Thank you for reading my novel, **Beauty and the Beastly Highlander**. I really hope you enjoyed it! If you did, could you please be so kind to [write your review HERE](#)?

It is **very important for me to read your thoughts** about my book, in order to get better at writing.

Please use the link below:

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Do you want more Romance?

If you're a true fan of the Scottish romance genre, here are the first chapters of my previous best-selling novel:

Lifting a Highland Lass's Curse

Olivia is a noble English Lady **living in the shadows** because of her birthmark. Yet, when she meets a handsome Highlander, named Blaine, she is almost ready to believe that love is possible for her as well. Until **a harsh secret** is revealed that will shutter her happiness. For how could a man like him desire someone like her?



* * *

Lifting a Highland Lass's Curse



Chapter One

“Cursed,” he whispered.

“Aye. Bedeviled for sure,” the other man whispered in reply.

Stifling her emotions, Olivia walked along the corridor with the hood of her cloak pulled low around her, trying to hide in the darkness. She felt the eyes of the guardsmen on her as she walked by them. They didn’t even bother trying to hide their contempt. Some seemed to have become emboldened, more willing to speak out, and openly sneered at her after the death of her parents.

She turned a corner and felt her heart lurch as she pulled up short. Three of the household’s chambermaids stood clustered together—two of them she didn’t know. But they stood, heads bowed together, whispering to one another. They stopped and turned when they saw Olivia. She swallowed hard, knowing the only way to the gardens was to walk past them. As Olivia passed by, they bowed their heads and fell silent, allowing their gazes to fall to the ground, as was proper.

She said not a word as she passed, but when she turned the corner, she stopped and pressed her back against the wall, taking a deep breath as she tried to calm her racing heart. Then, just before she was about to continue on her way, she heard their whispered voices.

“See? Didn’t I tell you? Did you see the mark?” said the one chambermaid she knew—Catherine. “She’s a monster, just like I said.”

“It is certainly unsightly, to be sure,” replied one of the others. “But I don’t think that makes her a monster.”

“Of course it does,” Catherine pressed. “No man is ever goin’ to want to be with her. Not with that kind of a mark on her.”

“You never know. There could be a man out there who can see past that,” replied the other girl. “She could find a man who loves her for who she is.”

Catherine and the girl with the Irish brogue laughed together like it was the funniest thing they’d ever heard. It made Olivia’s heart feel tight and difficult to breathe. The pain that shot through her was so deep, it made her knees feel weak. It was an effort for Olivia to remain standing.

“No man is going to want her,” Catherine said. “Not only is that mark unsightly, but it’s proof that she’s cursed.”

Tears welled in Olivia’s eyes. She knew she should walk away and stop listening to the three women gossiping, but she couldn’t make herself move. She’d heard their cruel words many times before. She’d hoped that in time, she’d develop a thicker skin, and she wouldn’t let them cut her so deeply.

But no matter how much time passed and how many times she heard those words, they never failed to hit her hard - every single time. The pain they caused her had never diminished in all the years she’d heard them.

“Aye. ‘tis true. She’s goin’ tae live a life filled with thae worst luck imaginable,” agreed the Irishwoman. “Look at what happened tae her parents. ‘tis because of her. She’s cursed.”

“It’s true,” Catherine said. “And do you believe any noble lord is going to want to take that sort of cursed, unsightly woman into his household?”

The pressure building inside of Olivia finally boiled over, and her body reacted without meaning to. With tears streaming down her face, hot with shame and humiliation, Olivia stepped back out into the corridor and glared at the three women malevolently.

“Unless you three wish for something terrible to befall you, I’d suggest you stop with your gossipmongering, keep a civil tongue and go about your work,” Olivia said, surprised by how cold her voice was. “Now. Go. Before I lose my temper and something unfortunate happens to all three of you.”

The three women looked at her with the same stricken expression, their faces blanching. Olivia knew she should not be berating them in that way. She was no longer the Duke’s daughter, and this was no longer her household. But the hurt and anger inside of her were so great, she could not contain herself. Giving them a final withering glare that sent them scampering, Olivia was left alone in the corridor. And as the tears continued to flow, she turned and fled, running for the secret passage that would take her out to the gardens.

The garden was the only place in the world where she felt comfortable. Where she could simply be herself. Now that her Uncle had moved into the family castle, it no longer felt like home. Yet, the garden was the only place that remained untouched and where she could still feel her parents. Sitting in the garden her father had created for her mother made her feel close to them. It was the only place in the world where she felt happy.

It allowed her to forget the morbidly curious looks and whispered insults that were a staple of her life. It allowed her to shut out conversations like the one she’d just overheard. She could never escape them. Wherever she went, people would stare at her. Or rather, stare at her disfigurement. It was why people whispered behind their hands about her being cursed and bedeviled. That was why they blamed her for the death of her parents.

And it was why, having seen twenty-four summers already, that she had no suitors – and likely would never have. No man in his right mind would ask for her hand. Not even with her handsome dowry. As a little girl, Olivia had been too naïve to realize how terribly her mark would handicap her life. She believed she would marry a handsome prince and live a life filled with love and joy. But, time had taught her that was not her lot in life. Now she knew that love

and happiness were not in the cards.

A lone tear spilled from the corner of her eye, and Olivia wiped it away angrily. She crawled to the edge of the small pond on her hands and knees. Pulling back her hood, she leaned over the edge, peering at her reflection on the surface of the water. Her hair, black as a raven's wing, framed a pale face, and her hazel-colored eyes glimmered like gold in the sunlight. She raised her hand and touched her right cheek. It was smooth and unblemished.

But then she turned her head to gaze at her right cheek, at her disfigurement. Olivia trailed the tips of her fingers across the wine-colored mark that marred her right cheek. The blemish ran from the corner of her mouth to her eye and from nose to ear. It took up most of the left side of her face and was why she kept her face hidden beneath a hood and stayed away from people. She hated that the mark was the only thing people stared at. As a consequence, when she looked at herself, it was the only thing she could see.

* * * * *

They sat in the smaller, more intimate dining room known as the Primrose Room, eating supper. It was the dining room she and her parents had dined in while they were alive – when they weren't hosting formal dinners in the great hall. Olivia had many fond memories of having supper with them. Memories of times filled with love and laughter.

But now, the Primrose, like everything else, belonged to her uncle. Thomas sat at the head of the polished oak table with his wife, Matilda, on his left. Olivia sat on his right, quietly sipping her soup. The only sounds in the room were the gentle clink of their spoons and the loud ticking of the clock. The mood was somewhat dour, as it usually was with her uncle. He was a grave man who was not prone to laughter, as her own parents had been. Particularly her mother. Olivia's mother had loved to laugh.

Thomas set his spoon down gently, wiped his mouth with the cloth

napkin, and then looked at Olivia. She had to suppress the shudder that swept through her when his gaze fell on her. Thomas had always been kind to her. He seemed to go out of his way to be good to her. He was a tall, lean, and severe-looking man with dark hair and dark, intense eyes. He was a general of some renown in the Crown's army and could be very cold and aloof. She figured it was his military nature that made him so. Olivia didn't think he intended to be, but his very presence was sometimes intimidating.

"Olivia," he said, his tone serious. "I have something I wish to discuss with you."

Olivia set her spoon down and wiped her mouth. "Yes, Uncle?"

"I know things for you here have been... difficult," he started. "And not just with the passing of your parents. I hear things. I see how people here treat you because of your... mark."

Olivia looked down, feeling the familiar wave of shame her mark always inspired. Her cheeks flushed, and she knew her face was turning red. Her uncle didn't say it to be mean, and he certainly wasn't mocking her. It was just a statement of fact. And to be fair, he never treated her badly about her disfigurement. If she had to choose a word to describe him, it would probably be sympathetic. She knew her uncle cared for her, and he treated her as well as he knew how. And she appreciated him for that.

"I hope you know that I don't care about your mark, Olivia. To me, you're my beautiful and ferociously intelligent niece. And you always will be," he said. "But with your parents gone, things have changed."

"Thank you, Uncle. And I am grateful that you have been so kind to me," she replied. "And I understand that things have changed."

"I do not like seeing you upset. I do not like seeing you wasting away," he added, his tone dripping with compassion. "I hate seeing you unhappy, Olivia. I remember when you used to smile, and believe me, it was a thing of beauty. Your smile could light up any

room.”

A small smile touched her lips at his words.

“I haven’t seen that smile in a very long time, and I miss it,” he added.

“To be true, I miss being happy, Uncle.”

His eyes lingered on her for another moment before his gaze shifted down to the table. The faint smile that had been on his face a moment before faltered and then faded away altogether. But he cleared his throat and looked up at her, his expression firm.

“It pains me to say that I do not think you’ll find your happiness here in England,” he said softly. “I have tried to find you a suitable match but have not had good fortune in that regard. I’m sorry that I’ve failed you.”

It was Olivia’s turn to give him a sympathetic smile. “You did not fail me, Uncle. It is not your fault that nobody wants to marry a monster.”

“You are hardly a monster, Olivia. Please get that thought out of your head this instant,” he said. “It is not your fault that some men are such shallow, vain creatures.”

His words lightened her heart a little, but it didn’t change the fact that men tended to view her as an unsightly beast. It did little to help her confidence or sense of self-worth. It was a constant poison that was eating away at her soul, and Olivia knew that one day there would be little left.

“In light of that, I’ve made arrangements for you to live with your mother’s best friend and her husband—the Lady and Laird Drummond,” he said. “I’m sending you to live in Scotland, where we will hopefully be able to secure you a match befitting a woman of your station.”

Olivia's heart dropped to her stomach, and she clapped her hands over her mouth. She looked at her uncle, waiting for him to laugh or say something to break the tension of the moment. But he remained silent.

"Sc—Scotland?" she gasped. "You're sending me away, Uncle?"

"Only because I want you to be happy, Olivia. I think perhaps a fresh start somewhere new will be good for you," he said. "I also think you will benefit greatly from being away from the whisperers and the gossipmongers here. A new environment will allow you to grow and flourish. I believe you can become the woman you were meant to be if you are away from the things here that keep you... trapped."

Olivia cocked her head. "Trapped, Uncle?"

"Yes," he said with a touch of sadness in his voice. "Trapped in your past. And also trapped inside yourself."

Confusion swept through her. "I'm not sure what you mean."

He sighed and ran a hand over his face. "There are people here who are cruel. They make you withdraw and hide within yourself. It breaks my heart to see it, Niece. But I don't know how to help," he said. "My hope is that by sending you to Scotland, by giving you a fresh start, you'll learn how to come out of that shell."

She sat back in her seat and pondered his words. She knew there was wisdom in them but could not see how to apply it to herself. People were going to be the same whether they were in England or Scotland. And nobody was going to ever see past her mark. Olivia didn't know how living in the north would change anything. It seemed as though her uncle was shipping her away so that she wasn't his problem. It was a cynical point of view, but her life didn't exactly equip her to see the world any other way.

She gave her uncle a weak smile. "If that's what you think is best, Uncle."

He reached over and took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. She looked up at him and found a soft smile upon his lips.

“I want you to have the life you deserve, Olivia. I want you to be happy,” he said. “And I want you to stop letting your mark define you. You are far more than your mark. I hope that given a fresh start in a new place, you will understand that. I also hope you can find yourself in Scotland.”

Happy. Olivia frowned. Happiness was something she would never attain. Not in this lifetime.

Chapter Two

Blaine slid out of his saddle and hit the ground, nearly toppling over. His legs wavered and felt like they were going to give way. But he managed to keep on his feet, if only just. The young stableboy approached, giving him an awkward bow. Blaine gave him a crooked smile and threw the reins to him.

“See to me horse, boy,” Blaine said. “We’ve had a long ride back from Edinburgh, and he needs food and water. And a good brushing.”

“Yes, me Laird.”

“I’m nae thae Laird, ye bleedin’ fool. That’d be me faither,” Blaine snapped. “I’m just a pawn in his grand game. No more important than ye, actually.”

Blaine drained the last of the bottle of spirits in his hand and threw it at the stable wall. It shattered with a loud crash, spraying tiny shards of glass everywhere. The stableboy looked at him with wide eyes, and Blaine snarled at him.

“Go see tae me horse, boy,” he roared. “Are ye bleedin’ simple?”

“Nay, me—sir,” he stammered.

The boy sketched an awkward bow, then turned and scurried off, leading Blaine’s horse into the stable. Blaine giggled to himself, still feeling a little lightheaded from the bottle of spirits. Trying to sober up, he turned and breathed deeply, inhaling the familiar odors that filled the castle bailey. He looked over to the stables that ran along the eastern wall. A smithy’s forge was also on that side of the bailey. Along the western wall was a row of stalls, mostly selling roasted meats and other assorted vendors. On the southern wall

behind the castle were barracks for his father's soldiers. The main gates were set into the northern wall.

Blaine walked around the bailey, looking at the changes his time away at university in Edinburgh had wrought. He had been gone but a few years, but the time had brought many changes to the family castle. Somewhat depressingly, though, he noticed many things had remained exactly the same.

"So, thae rumors are true. Ye're back."

Blaine turned around to find Agan, one of his father's men-at-arms, leaning against his pike. Agan was a tall man, broad through the shoulders and chest. He had light brown hair and dark brown eyes. He bore a jagged scar that ran along the left side of his jaw, curling upward in a fishhook that ended just below his eye. The beard on his face was thick—save for that line of pale, puckered flesh.

Agan had been Blaine's friend since they were boys, and there was nobody in the world he trusted more. Blaine had always believed they were closer than brothers—a sentiment Blaine was certain Agan shared.

"Aye. They've called me back early," Blaine said. "They told me there was a severe lack of good looks around here, and they wanted me to come home to fix it."

Agan laughed heartily and stepped forward, pulling Blaine into a tight embrace. They thumped each other on the back then took a step back. The two men took a moment to look each other over and smiled.

"Ye smell like ye just crawled out of a bottle," Agan told him with a chuckle.

"'twas a long road to get here. Nae much tae dae but have a drink."

"A drink? Smells like ye had all thae drinks."

They shared a laugh together. Seeing his old friend was doing Blaine's heart a world of good. It dulled some of his resentment at being called home from his studies before he'd completed them. He wanted to finish his education at one of the most renowned universities in the world. More than that, he wanted to enjoy the life of a student. To enjoy life in general. Edinburgh was famous for the intellectual ability it harnessed, but to Blaine, it was just as renowned for its drink and its women. And there had been many women.

Just thinking about it aroused him and made him long to be in the arms of the women he'd routinely bedded. He doubted he'd find as many beautiful lasses in Glaslaw Castle willing to give him their intimate embrace. And that thought made him resentful as well. Agan clapped him on the shoulder, drawing him back to the present.

"'tis good to see ye again, lad," Agan said.

"Aye. 'tis good to see yer ugly mug as well."

"I dinnae expect to see ye back for a while yet," Agan said. "Arenae ye supposed tae be studyin' in Edinburgh?"

"'twas supposed tae be," he grumbled. "Me faither sent for me and bid me tae return. He said there was an urgent matter he needed tae discuss with me."

"Aye? What's so urgent?"

Blaine shook his head. "I've nay idea. Knowin' me faither thae way I dae, it'll probably be somethin' bleedin' stupid, like which color feather he should wear in his helm."

Agan chuckled, his voice a deep rumble. "Aye. It would nae surprise me tae find ye're right about that."

Blaine reached out and touched the insignia on the tunic sleeve that

poked out from beneath Agan's boiled leather cuirass and smiled.

"Ye seem tae be doin' well for yerself," Blaine said. "A sergeant now, eh?"

Agan nodded. "Aye. When he promoted me, yer faither told me he could never have too many smart, intelligent, and devastatingly handsome men in command."

Blaine laughed and shook his head. "Daenae let that go ta eyer head," he stated. "He needs tae say somethin' tae make ye feel good about yerself."

"Well, I suppose it worked because I feel very good about meself."

Blaine laughed. "Ye always have, lad."

"Aye. Mebbe so."

Blaine was grateful to have run into Agan. Their conversation sobered him and made him more focused than when he'd first slipped off his horse. That could only be a good thing—especially in light of his next destination.

"Well, I suppose I cannae put it off much longer," he said. "I suppose I need tae get in tae see what me faither wants."

"Probably goin' tae ask for yer help polishin' his sword."

Blaine laughed long and loud. "Aye," he said through his laughter. "Ye're probably right about that."

"Aye. I should get tae thae gatehouse anyway," he added. "How about we share a bottle of spirits tonight. Catch up on our lives."

"I'd like that," Blaine replied. "But we better make it two bottles. I think I'm goin' tae need one of me own after dealin' with me parents."

“Aye. Two bottles it is then,” Agan replied. “It really is good tae see ya again.”

“Aye. Ye tae.”

Blaine watched as his friend walked across the bailey, heading for the guardhouse on the main gate. That was one thing he liked and admired about Agan—his willingness to roll up his sleeves and do the work he’d have others do. Blaine had seen plenty of men in elevated positions who refused to do the job they’d ordered their men to do.

To Blaine, it showed that Agan didn’t think he was above anyone. It showed his integrity. That he was humble enough to still hold a post, and even though he was of a higher rank, he didn’t think himself better than anybody. Blaine knew that one day, Agan would make a grand commander of his father’s forces.

Finally, turning around, Blaine walked across the bailey and walked into the keep. The servants all bowed and gave a respectful nod as he passed by. There were few faces he recognized, but the fact that they all knew him was somewhat unsettling. His boots thudded heavily on the stone floor of the corridor, and turning a corner, Blaine nearly ran straight into Carson, the household chamberlain.

Carson was a tall, thin man with green eyes, pale skin, and thinning hair that was once dark but was gradually turning silver. Though Carson was most definitely his father’s man, he’d always been fair to Blaine. Even indulgent once in a while. He looked at Blaine with an expression of annoyance; no doubt upset that he’d almost been knocked over. But when Carson recognized Blaine, his eyes grew wide, and a smile crossed his lips.

“Master Blaine,” he gasped. “I dinnae expect ye here.”

Blaine smiled. “I dinnae expect tae be here either,” he replied with a note of bitterness in his voice. “And yet, here I am all thae same.”

“Aye. Well. ‘tis good tae see ye, Master Blaine,” he said. “Yer faither

is in thae grand hall hearin' petitioners."

"Right. Thank ye, Carson."

"Of course," he replied. "I'll have thae chambermaids freshen up yer room."

"Me thanks," Blaine said.

Blaine turned again and strode through the corridors—taking the long route through the keep, trying to put off seeing his parents for as long as humanely possible.

But after five minutes or so, Blaine knew he couldn't postpone it anymore. So, he walked the long corridor that led to the pair of heavy oak and steel banded doors of the great hall. A couple of men-at-arms flanked the doors, swords on their hips, pikes in their hands.

"Master Blaine," said the guard on the left. "Good tae see ye."

"Aye. Good tae see ye tae, lad."

The man reached out and opened the door, holding it open for him. Blaine nodded his thanks and walked into the great hall. The heavy door closed behind him with a loud, hollow noise. The great hall was circular and made of thick stone. A beautiful stained-glass window was set into the wall behind the dais holding the Laird and Lady's chairs. Both seats were occupied.

Sconces held torches that flickered and guttered, spaced at regular intervals along the walls around the chamber. Ornately woven tapestries hung between the torches and a large rug sat at the foot of the dais where his mother and father were seated. It was for the petitioners' comfort when they knelt before the Laird.

At present, two men were kneeling on the carpet, both of them pleading their cases passionately. His father sat back in the massive

and ornately tooled chair, his legs crossed and not even attempting to hide his expression of boredom. Yet, on the other hand, his mother seemed to be paying close attention to every word the two men said.

When the door banged closed, she looked up, and her expression changed. Unlike the mask of cool indifference she wore as she listened to the petitioners - when her eyes fell on Blaine, they widened, with a look of pure joy. But she quickly controlled herself and looked down at the two men.

“We have heard everything you have said and will take it into consideration,” she said, trying to rush them along. “And we will have a decision for you in a couple of days. Now, if you will excuse us....”

The men rose, gave a bow, and walked toward the doors, glowering at each other every step of the way. Blaine stepped closer to the dais as his mother bounded down the stairs and threw herself into his arms, squeezing him tightly. Finally, she stepped back and looked at him, taking his hands in hers.

“Oh, my baby boy. ‘tis so wonderful tae see ye,” she said, beaming.

“Aye. ‘tis good tae see ye tae mother.”

She smiled, but her lips wavered as a strange look crossed her face, and a slight frown curled the corners of her mouth downward.

“Have ye been drinkin’?” she asked.

Blaine gave her a crooked grin. “Mebbe a wee bit.”

“A wee bit?” How much is a wee bit?”

Blaine shrugged. “Let’s nae talk about that right now.”

“Is it a wee bit more than ye had in Edinburgh then?”

Doing his best not to roll his eyes, Blaine looked up at the dais. His father was still reclined and hadn't made a move to come to greet him. He hadn't even offered a word of greeting. Not that Blaine was surprised. His relationship with his father was—complicated.

“So why did ye send for me then, eh?” Blaine asked.

“It was time. Ye've things tae attend tae here at home,” his father said.

“What kind of things?”

“For starters, 'tis time for me tae find ye a proper match. Ye need a wife,” his father said. “And I'm goin' tae find ye one.”

“And if I daenae want tae marry, Faither?” Blaine added, a dark tone to his words

“Don't be ridiculous. ‘tis our way. And 'tis yer duty tae thae family.”

Blaine sighed but held his tongue. What he couldn't stop was the frustration building up within him. His father finally leaned forward in his seat, laying his forearms down along his thighs. He looked at Blaine, who felt uncomfortable as his father's eyes bore into him. It was as if his father could see inside him. See all his secrets. See his soul. His father frowned.

“And now that ye're home, ye're goin' tae be a better man than ye were down in Edinburgh,” he said, then held up his hand to forestall the argument Blaine already had queued up in his mind. “There will be nae drinkin', and there will be nae whorin'. Thae life ye lived and thae man ye were in Edinburgh will stay in Edinburgh. Am I clear?”

“Faither—”

“I said, am I clear?”

Blaine glanced at his mother, who was frowning as she looked down at the ground. He wondered what was going through her mind. Was she trying to hide the disappointment she felt in learning that he'd behaved less than ideal at university? But the anger was simmering inside of him, and when he turned back to his father, his fury was rising dangerously high.

“Are you following me, Faither? Did you have somebody watching me?”

His father nodded. “Of course I did. I had a vested interest in keeping you safe, so aye. And I’ll nae be apologizin’ for it either.”

“Does me privacy mean nothin’ tae ye?”

His father scoffed. “When ye’re the son of thae Laird, ye daenae have thae luxury of privacy,” he said. “And what I’m askin’ ye is nae too much tae ask. Ye’ve had yer fun. Ye’ve sowed yer oats. Now ‘tis time for ye tae settle down and do yer duty for thae good of thae clan.”

“Ye mean, to dae what’s good for ye, since ye’ll reap the benefits of marryin’ me off tae somebody wealthy, eh?”

His father’s expression darkened. “It’s time for ye tae stand up and be a man. Tis time for ye tae put thae clan first.”

Blaine was angry. He couldn’t believe his father was lecturing him about his duty but that he’d had him watched—it was all infuriating. He glanced at his mother, who quickly took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“Ye look tired, dear. I’m sure after such a long ride from Edinburgh, ye want tae clean up and get some rest, eh?”

His mother was giving him an out. The tension was certainly rising in the room, and it appeared that a fight was inevitable. It always upset her when Blaine argued with his father, and she would always

do whatever she could to diffuse the tension and protect him.

“Aye. I’m beat,” he said. “I’ll go and clean up and get some rest.”

She nodded, a small smile on her lips. “I’ll have supper sent to your chamber tonight.”

“Thank ye, Maither.”

“Of course, Blaine,” she said. “I’m just happy to have you home.”

Blaine gave her a small smile and a curt nod. He leaned forward, planted a gentle kiss on her cheek, and then walked out of the great hall without acknowledging his father. He wasn’t happy to be home, and he certainly didn’t want to marry whoever his father picked out for him. And as he made his way to his chambers, he silently vowed to himself that he would do everything in his power to prevent it from happening.

Chapter Three

“Are ye all right, then?” Aisling asked.

Olivia pursed her lips and was doing her best to control her emotions. Aisling, who had been her lady in waiting and best friend since they were children, took her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. Aisling was the daughter of her mother’s former lady in waiting. And though Aisling’s mother returned to Ireland after Olivia’s parents were killed, she stayed, unwilling to leave Olivia. And she was forever thankful to Aisling for that.

“I’m all right,” she said. “If you want to get settled into the carriage, I’ll be there in just a moment.”

Aisling squeezed her hand once more before climbing into the carriage. Olivia’s uncle stepped close to her, taking up the hand Aisling had just released. His expression was mournful, but he quickly gained control, masking his emotions once more. She knew he needed to show strength—especially in front of the household staff.

“Please convey my best regards to the Laird and Lady Drummond,” Olivia’s uncle said.

“I will,” she replied.

Standing next to the carriage, Olivia looked around the bailey of the keep for what she thought would be the last time. The entire household staff had turned out to bid her farewell—or rather, had been ordered to. They all stood behind her, and Olivia felt their eyes on her. She felt the weight of their gaze and felt sure they were all looking at her mark.

Pulling the hood of her cloak lower, she continued to look around

at the high stone walls of the keep—her home. She would not let these cruel people deprive her of one final look at the keep. Here, she had spent all of her twenty-four summers and was the only home she'd ever known. It was where she'd grown up and where she had thought she would spend her entire life. When she was a girl, she'd dreamed of raising her own family within those stone walls. It would have been an excellent place to raise children, build a life, and carry on all the best traditions of her family.

But those dreams had all come crashing down around her. All her plans and dreams lay smoldering in a pile of wreckage. And no matter how kindly the move was intentioned, Olivia couldn't help but feel that she was being banished.

She understood why her uncle was sending her north. His decision and his reasoning for it made perfect sense. But knowing she would never walk the stone walls of her family's keep again was too much to bear. To know that she would never sit beneath the trees in the garden, or breathe in the delicate aromas of the flowers, or hear the birds call overhead left her heart shattered.

"I will miss this place," she said softly, tears welling in her eyes.

"And we will miss having you here," he replied.

His cheeks and nose were red, and her uncle looked as if he were holding back tears of his own. He reached out for her and pulled Olivia into a tight embrace, and stroked her hair. She genuinely felt that he would miss her, and while that did nothing to blunt the pain in her heart, it made her feel slightly better to know this was not easy for him either.

Her uncle stepped back and gave her a small, sad smile. "Off you go then. And please, write to us, Niece. Let us know how you are getting on in the north."

"I will, Uncle."

Giving him one last wavering smile, she turned and climbed into

the carriage. Her uncle stepped forward and shut the door. He turned and gave the four men on horseback—her guardsmen—a nod.

“Keep my niece safe,” he said, his voice solemn. “Get her to Glaslaw Castle safely.”

“Aye, m’lord,” replied the man in command.

Her uncle stepped back again and raised his hand in farewell as Olivia sat back and the carriage lurched to a start. When they passed the gates of the keep and were out on the road, the carriage bouncing and shuddering as it rolled through the rough and pitted dirt road, Olivia stuck her head out the window. Two men in armor rode ahead of the carriage while one rode on her left and her right. She knew a man was sitting on the seat at the rear of the carriage to prevent anybody from riding up behind and catching them unaware.

Her uncle had sent many men with her, tasked with keeping her safe. She was glad for it, though, and it made her breathe somewhat easier. Her parents had been murdered while traveling in a carriage, and ever since, Olivia distrusted that mode of travel. In fact, she hardly went anywhere. She’d hidden within the walls of the keep and rarely went out because of her mark, and she was terrified to travel.

“Well, it seems as if we’re off on a grand adventure, eh?” Aisling asked with a smile.

“I suppose so.”

Aisling frowned. “I ken ye’re nae happy about this. But it could be thae best thing that ever happened tae ye,” she said. “Gettin’ a fresh start in a new place? Not only that but gettin’ away from that horrid wretch Catherine... those are good things. I ken it may nae feel like it now, but ye’ll see. It’ll be good for ye.”

Olivia leaned back against the seat and closed her eyes, her body

swaying with the rhythm of the carriage as it bounced and rolled along the road. Her mind drifted back to the night that changed her life forever—and not necessarily for the better. Her parents had traveled to a neighboring keep to visit the lord who resided there.

Her father hadn't told her many of the details about the purpose of the visit but said it had to do with building an alliance. At the time, Olivia thought her father was trying to secure her a suitable match. But she felt he didn't want to raise her hopes again and so had not wanted to tell her. He had been trying for several years to marry her to a man he considered worthy of his only daughter. But her mark had left her without any viable matches.

"I don't see how things will be any different in Scotland than they are here," she said. "It isn't as if I am leaving this mark behind."

Aisling opened her mouth to speak but closed it again without saying anything. There really was nothing for her to say because Olivia was right. Changing her location would do nothing to change her fortune. Her mark would see to that. Aside from Aisling, whom she loved like a sister, Olivia was going to be as alone in Scotland as she was in England.

Even worse, there would be new people to contend with, people who had never seen her mark before and who would feel less compelled to keep their cruel remarks to themselves. Olivia sighed and settled back in her seat again, trying to push away all the thoughts and fears that rampaged through her mind.

* * * * *

They had been traveling for more than two days already, stopping at an inn each night for food and rest. Olivia had noticed that the further they traveled away from England and deeper into Scotland, the roads and the people they encountered grew rougher. Harder. But the land around them was unlike anything she'd seen before.

Olivia stared out the window at the land passing by, admiring the

seas of green that stretched out as far as the eye could see. Patches of wildflowers broke up the emerald vistas, a riot of colors scattered amongst the endless green. The air was redolent with the aroma of flowers and somehow seemed fresher. It reminded her of the walled garden she enjoyed spending time in back home.

But there were no walls here. Nothing but open sky and land. And for the first time since her parents were killed, she felt like she could truly breathe. Without stone and timber surrounding her on every side and nothing but open land and natural beauty all around her, Olivia smiled and breathed deeply. She savored it.

“It’s beautiful here,” Olivia said. “I’ll give it that.”

“It is at that. I’ve never seen so much green before,” Aisling replied. “Me maither says Ireland is a lot like this, but I daenae remember it. We came tae England when I was just a babe.”

“It’s certainly nothing like home. It’s breathtaking.”

“Aye. ‘tis gorgeous.”

She heard the guards who surrounded the carriage begin to shout to one another and felt a surge of fear tear through her. She looked to Aisling to find her face a mask of fear. The carriage shuddered and seemed to be picking up speed. The guards galloped alongside, the men shouting orders back and forth to one another.

But then Olivia screamed when she saw an arrow take the man next to her side of the carriage. He grunted and toppled from his horse.

“Keep goin’,” one of her men shouted. “We’ll hold ‘em off!”

The sound of steel ringing on steel shattered the air around them. Aisling looked at her friend, eyes wide and terror etched upon her features. Olivia’s heart raced, and her mouth suddenly became dry. She trembled from head to toe, fear making her eyes well with tears.

“What is it, m’lady?” she gasped. “What’s happenin’?”

“Bandits, Aisling,” she replied, her voice tinged with panic. “We’re bein’ set upon by bandits.”

Chapter Four

“Yer faither only wants thae best for ye, Blaine. But ye ken how he is. Ye ken he doesnae express himself very well.”

Blaine looked at his mother, Caitriona, and gave her a soft smile. “Ye always have tried playin’ peacemaker between me and da.”

Blaine and his father seemed to be perpetually at odds. And for as far back as he could recall, it had been his mother who stood between them, doing everything she could to keep the tensions between them from boiling over. She had always had a knack for smoothing down the near-constant ruffled feathers with her soft, soothing words. Caitriona had always been able to keep them from going after each other with naked steel. It was a delicate balancing act, but one she’d been able to pull off with grace and ease.

She chuckled softly. “Mebbe if ye both werenae so bleedin’ stubborn, I wouldnae have tae work so hard at it.”

They walked along the path that ran along the rear grounds of the keep. Glaslaw Castle, his family’s ancestral home, set atop a finger of land that jutted out into the ocean. A low, stone wall ran from the rear of the keep and around the entire finger, giving it an enclosed feeling. Blaine often liked sitting on the wall when he was younger, watching the waves roll in off the ocean.

He loved listening to the waves crash against the craggy shoreline below and enjoyed the thick scent of the sea air and the cries of the ocean birds above. Blaine had always found a sense of peace out there. He loved sitting on the wall staring into the ocean as much as he loved wandering through the forest. He just loved being out amongst nature as a whole. It fed his soul and never failed to ease his mind and heart. Until now, anyway.

"If da wanted thae best for me, he would have let me finish me schoolin'. He would have let me have a life before he chained me tae thae bleedin' clan," Blaine groused.

His mother frowned. "He felt ye were focused tae much on havin' a life than ye were on yer studies, Blaine. He'd been told ye were more interested in wine and women than ye were on yer studies. And if half of what I heard is true, I'd have come tae thae same conclusion."

Blaine picked up a small stone and hurled it over the cliff and out into the ocean. "As if he dinnae dae his share of drinkin' and womanizin' when he was at university."

"I'm nae sayin' he dinnae. And I'm nae sayin' he's bein' entirely reasonable. But ye've responsibilities here, son."

"Aye. Daenae I ken it."

A long moment of silence stretched between them as Blaine continued to glower and silently curse his father. His mother, though, looked at him with an expression of compassion. He thought she seemed genuinely sorry for what happened. Not that it mattered—certainly not Blaine's hopes and dreams. Nor his mother's whims or wants. No, inside that keep, the only thing that mattered was what his father wanted. His father always got his way. He was the Laird and his word, after all, was law.

She sighed. "It wouldnae have made a difference if yer faither had kent, Blaine. He was set on gettin' ye home tae start groomin' ye tae be thae Laird."

"And what if I dinnae want tae be thae Laird?" Blaine asked, wincing at how petulant he sounded. "I could have had a career as a physician. I could have done some great things. I could have had a life of me own."

"Ye can still dae great things, Blaine," she said quietly. "I remember when ye used tae talk about thae changes ye'd make tae thae clan. I

remember ye talkin' about making thae clan great again. Ye used tae talk about makin' these lands thae envy of all of Scotland."

A wry grin crossed his lips. "I was a lad. A naïve, stupid lad," he replied. "I dinnae ken how thae world really worked back then."

"That can be how thae world works when ye take thae Laird's chair, son," she said. "When ye're in charge, ye can dae anything ye want. Ye can make any changes and run thae clan any way ye wish."

"But I daenae if I want that life."

Her smile was a little sad but patient. "I daenae ken if ye have thae option, Blaine," she said. "Yer place is here with yer people. With yer family."

In addition to being the designated peacekeeper, his mother had constantly reminded Blaine of his place in the family. She'd taken great pains to remind Blaine that his position would be at the head of the family—eventually. She told him he could be a greater Laird than his father and lead the clan to heights greater than even his father could have imagined.

Blaine didn't doubt that. His father was tough and ruled with an iron fist and did not suffer fools. He made Clan Drummond a martial force to be reckoned with and a significant player in Scottish politics. Those were achievements Blaine would never deprive him of. But his father was a man who lacked imagination. He saw things in black and white but never seemed able to recognize the shades of gray that made up most of the world.

His father saw things one way and one way only. Especially when he had his mind made up about something. When he saw something he wanted, he was single-minded about attaining it. He was like a dog with a bone and suffered from tunnel vision. On the other hand, Blaine could see those shades of gray and knew that seeing things one way, especially in pursuit of something grand, made it less likely to happen. Blaine knew you had to adjust and adapt to the world rather than expecting it to conform to you.

"I have tae go," Blaine said. "I'm supposed tae meet Wallace."

Blaine stood up and walked away from his mother before she could reply. He loved his mother with his whole heart, but he didn't want to sit there and listen to her try to convince him to accept his place at the head of the clan. He knew what his duty was—and he would do it.

But that didn't mean he had to be happy about it.

* * * * *

"I ken ye're nae happy about it, but I'm glad tae have ye back," Wallace said.

"Aye. 'tis good tae see ye again. But if I had me choice, I'd rather be seein' thae lasses in Edinburgh than ye."

Wallace laughed. "Aye. I suppose I cannae blame ye for that."

They casually rode the trail that ran along the coast, the air thick with the scent of salt. The waves crashed against the shore, sending white water high into the air as they slammed against the rocky shoreline. It was out there, away from the keep and pressures of life, that Blaine finally felt himself start to relax.

As they rode, Blaine lost himself in the steady rhythm of his horse's hoofbeats thumping on the dirt beneath them. But then another sound infiltrated his mind. He perked up, cocked his head, and listened.

"Oy. Ye hear that?" he asked.

"Hear what?" Wallace replied.

Blaine strained his ears and listened. It took a moment, but he realized he was hearing laughter and the sound of men speaking loudly and raucously. Blaine couldn't explain it, but he felt there

was something malevolent beneath all the boisterousness.

“Ye hear that?” he asked.

Wallace cocked his head and nodded. “Aye. What dae ye reckon it is?”

He shook his head. “Nae sure. But I get thae feelin’ it’s nothin’ good.”

“Well, let’s go and see what these bleedin’ bampots are getting’ up tae then.”

“Just what I was thinkin’.”

They spurred their horses on, coming around a bend in the road to find five men surrounding a carriage. A pair of men in what looked like the livery of a noble English house stood between the men on horse and the carriage, swords bared. Three other men in the same uniform lay on the ground—one with an arrow sticking out of his chest. But Blaine didn’t know the condition of the other two.

In the carriage, Blaine saw two figures. He was sure one was a woman—he could see her long blonde hair. The other figure was wearing a cloak with the hood pulled up. The deep shadows prevented him from seeing their faces.

“Let’s go, Wallace. We cannae let this happen.”

“Aye. Let’s get tae it then.”

Blaine and Wallace spurred their horses on, racing toward the carriage and the men setting upon it. They reined to a stop and drew their blades as all the other men turned to them, confusion on their faces.

“This is Clan Drummond land, and I am thae son of thae Laird,” Blaine intoned. “We daenae tolerate robbery and violence against

women in these lands.”

The man who was clearly the leader of the brigands turned in his saddle and looked at Blaine. He was a tall man with dark hair that fell to his shoulders, dark eyes, and a permanent sneer. He had a bushy beard and a scar that ran from the corner of his right eye to the corner of his mouth.

“Have ye seen what’s in that carriage then, lad?” he asked. “’tis nae a woman. ‘tis more of a beast if ye were tae ask me.”

“What is yer name?” Blaine asked.

“Me name’s Cormac. These are me lads,” he replied. “What’s it tae ye?”

“Clanless Brigands,” Wallace said.

“Aye. We answer tae nay Laird. We want nay Laird. Nor any clan,” Cormac said. “But we’re nae brigands. Ye mistake thae situation.”

“Like hell he does,” said one of the guards.

Blaine looked down at the man who’d spoken. He had an English accent, confirming his initial thought about the livery. What Blaine didn’t know was what an English noble would be doing on his lands.

“These ruffians have already killed one of our men,” the Englishman went on. “The other two may die yet if we do not get them some help soon.”

“Who’s in thae carriage?” Blaine asked.

“We are bearing the Lady Olivia to Glaslaw Castle. Or we were before these brigands set upon us,” he said. “So, if you are the son of the Laird, then you must help us see her there safely. She is under the protection of your father.”

"If that—creature—in there is a Lady, then I'm thae bleedin' King of England," Cormac chuckled"

"Ye keep a civil tongue in yer head. Or I'll cut it out," Blaine hissed, then turned to the guardsmen. "And I'm well aware of me duties."

The air crackled with tension and the anticipation of violence. Cormac and his men looked like they weren't about to leave until they had the contents of the wagon—which might have included the women within. Blaine knew men like these. Knew the violence and degradations they were capable of. And though he hadn't known, his parents had offered their protection to an English noble. If it was true, then he was dutybound to enforce that protection.

"I'll give ye this one chance tae turn around and leave me clan's lands," Blaine said. "Leave now, and ye'll be unharmed. Dinnae do it, and ye and yer men will taste me steel."

"We'll be takin' thae bags and trunks off that carriage," Cormac said, his voice low and hard. "And we'll be takin' thae Irish lass with us tae. I'd take thae other one, but it kills me arousal just tae look at her."

The men with Cormac laughed, and when Blaine looked to the girl in the carriage, he noticed that she pulled her hood lower and turned away from the window. He could practically feel the heat of her shame and embarrassment. It made Blaine wonder what sort of disfigurement or affliction she suffered from. But he determined that whatever it was, she did not deserve the threats or the abuse she was enduring at the hands of a fool like Cormac.

"Ye'll be takin' nothin', but yer mangy hides out of me clan's lands," Blaine said. "And ye'll dae it now."

Cormac laughed and opened his mouth to speak, but the words never came as Blaine moved lightning fast. In one smooth motion, he pulled one of his throwing knives and launched it. The man sitting on his horse next to Cormac reached for his throat, a wet gurgling noise coming from his mouth. He slumped and fell off his

horse, hitting the ground with a meaty thud. Before Cormac could react, the man on his other side dropped to the ground, the hilt of another knife sprouting from his throat.

"I'd say that evens the odds," Blaine said as he leaped from the saddle of his horse.

He charged Cormac, his blade held high in a blocking move. Steel rang against steel as Cormac chopped down at Blaine, who grabbed hold of the brigand's leg. He violently ripped him from his horse, and Blaine grinned as Cormac hit the ground with a choking gasp, the air driven from his lungs. An arrow went sailing by his head, passing so close, Blaine fancied he felt the wind rushing by. But then Wallace was there, still on horseback, engaging the bowman.

Wallace was a big man who was unusually strong. And when he brought his sword down, he cleaved the man's bow in half with ease. The bowman fumbled for his blade, but Wallace had already swung his blade again, the edge of the steel biting deep into the man's side. He screamed and fell from the horse, his light-colored tunic quickly turning crimson.

Blaine turned his attention back to Cormac, who had struggled back to his feet. His face was etched with pain. But he quickly regained his footing, a sneer on his lips.

"Ye've made a mistake here, lad," Cormac gasped.

"Then come correct me, eh?"

Cormac waded in, delivering a slash with his blade that would have cut Blaine in half if it had connected. But Blaine was fast on his feet and danced backward out of range, a grin on his lips. The brigand rushed in again and Blaine, toying with the man, spun to the side. He kicked out with his foot at the last minute, tripping Cormac and the brigand went sprawling. He hit the ground with a grunt but was back on his feet, his sword ready, in the blink of an eye.

With the rest of Cormac's remaining men sorted, Wallace and the

English guardsmen stood by and watched, chuckling with amusement. Cormac's face burned bright red with his humiliation. He snarled at Blaine and rushed him again, leading with the point of his blade. Blaine was able to turn it aside with his own sword before driving his face into the man's face. There was a loud crack, and blood fountained from his nose.

Cormac staggered backward, his face cupped in his hands. Blaine stepped back and watched, sure the man was going to give up the fight. But he shook his head, spraying droplets of blood everywhere, then looked at Blaine, the blood all over his face giving him a ghastly visage, hatred burning in his eyes.

"Give it up, lad. Ye're beaten," Blaine said.

"Sod off. I'm goin' tae kill ye."

"Ye can leave here with yer hide intact. But ye'd best be on yer way. Now," Blaine commanded, trying to give the man one more out.

Cormac, however, raised his blade once more and rushed at him. Blaine sighed. He had trained with a blade since he was a young lad and was now a master with the steel. As Cormac closed the distance between them, Blaine dodged to the side, lashing back with the flat of his blade. He caught the brigand across the back of the head, the force of the blow staggering him. Cormac went down hard on his knees and groaned. A small cut opened on the back of his head, and blood spilled down his back.

The brigand slowly rose once more and turned around. Blaine could see by the look on his face that Cormac knew he'd been bested and his taste for the fight ebbed.

"Enough?" Blaine asked.

Cormac nodded and looked down at the ground, seemingly ashamed. Or perhaps just embarrassed that he'd been beaten so easily. The guards and Wallace laughed openly, only deepening the

man's look of distress. But he dropped his sword at his feet all the same.

“Load yer men onto yer horses and get all of ye gone, then,” Blaine said. “And daenae ye ever think about settin’ foot upon Clan Drummond land again, eh?”

As Coran solemnly went about his orders, Blaine walked over to the Englishmen. The guard held out his hand, but instead, Blaine gripped his forearm in the traditional warrior's handshake.

“Well met,” said the Englishman. “And we thank you for your assistance.”

“Ye mean yer rescue?” Wallace added with a grin.”

The guard's expression darkened, but he quickly nodded. “Yes. For your rescue.”

“Ye're nae far from thae keep,” Blaine said. “Get yer wounded intae thae carriage and bring them tae me faither's physician. We'll ferry thae girls thae rest of thae way tae thae keep.”

“I would prefer to accompany the Lady Olivia myself—”

“Ye need tae see tae yer men. If me family is tae be responsible for this girl's safety, I'd prefer tae see tae it meself.”

“Thank you for your assistance,” she said softly. “I am grateful and indebted to you.”

Blaine turned to see the hooded Englishwoman climbing down from the carriage. Her face was hidden in the shadows, and she made no move to show herself. She was petite but curvy and had the sort of figure that Blaine had always craved, and it made him curious to see what she looked like beneath her hood. Her companion, the blonde he'd spied earlier, climbed down after her. The hooded woman turned to her guardsman.

“Please do as he says, Captain White,” she said. “We will go with them.”

Chapter Five

Olivia stood beside the carriage, looking up at the tall Scotsman, quite taken with how handsome he was. The man's hair was the color of rust, tied at the neck, and fell to the middle of his back. His eyes sparkled like polished emeralds. She noticed his skin was the color of alabaster and his cheeks smooth and freshly shaven. He was broad through the shoulders and chest, and she could tell, even beneath his breeches and tunic, that he was taut with corded muscle.

Aisling stood close behind her, and Olivia could feel the warmth of lust radiating from her friend as heat emanates from a fire. It was all she could do to keep from turning around and giving her a wicked, knowing smile. But if this was the Laird's son, she needed to maintain her composure. Her actions, after all, reflected upon her uncle—as well as upon her entire family name.

“And what is your name?” Olivia asked, surprised at how steady and even her voice remained despite everything that had just happened.

“I'm Blaine, m'lady,” he replied, looking at her curiously. “This is me friend, Wallace.”

The man with him stepped forward, and she heard Aisling quietly gasp. Wallace was slightly taller than Blaine. He had a head of thick, dark hair and eyes the color of night.

“We appreciate you intervening in what was a frightening situation,” she said.

“’twas our pleasure, Miss. We're just glad we arrived in time.”

Olivia stood in awkward silence for a long moment, unsure what to

say. She had never been the most outward or assertive girl but standing in front of such a handsome man—one who had just saved her life, no less—had her blushing in ways she never knew she could. It made her all the more conscious of her mark, which sent the familiar waves of shame washing over her. As if she could feel it, Aisling grabbed her hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Olivia found it curious that he had not asked her to pull back her hood. Nearly everyone did upon their first meeting. After that, they never asked again, as if they couldn't bear the sight of her. Blaine, however, didn't seem the least bit curious about why she hid her face. The fact nagged at her, and Olivia wondered if he'd been told of her deformity already. But as he looked at her, he had a gentle smile upon his face and not the look of horror that colored the faces of most people who saw her.

Blain stepped forward and took her hand, brushing the back of her knuckles with his lips. The feeling of his lips sent a shock down her spine, and she trembled openly. He looked up at her with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, and Olivia knew he had felt her quivering. He stood up, though, good enough not to mention it.

“’tis good tae make yer acquaintance, me Lady,” he said. “Welcome tae Stonehaven, home of Clan Drummond.”

She gave him a small curtsy and bowed her head. “Thank you for the rescue and the warm welcome. I am glad to be here.”

He cocked his head and looked at her for a moment, a smile playing across his lips. She could tell he knew she was lying about being glad to be in Scotland, but he didn't pursue it any further. And though he said nothing, she could see the questions in his face. Like most, he was curious about her hood. But unlike all, he said nothing about it. She could tell that Blaine was a true gentleman, and she appreciated it.

“I'm surprised. Most people want to know why I wear a hood,” she said finally, her voice wavering. “You're the first not to ask me to remove it. Aren't you the least bit curious?”

A small smile flickered across his face that only highlighted his strong jawline and handsome features. Olivia felt her heart flutter but fought to keep it under control. She could see him looking her up and down appraisingly. And judging by the smoldering gaze in his eyes, Olivia could tell he enjoyed what he was seeing. She fought to suppress her smile as butterfly wings battered the inside of her belly.

“Of course, I’m curious. I’m inquisitive about a great many things,” he said, his tone carrying an edge of flirtatiousness. “But it’s nae me business. I figure ye’ll show me yer face when ye’re ready. ‘tis nae me place to demand it of ye.”

It was such an unexpected answer that Olivia found herself stunned for a moment. She had no words to reply. Very few people in her life had ever shown her such respect or consideration.

“We should probably go,” he said. “Cormac may come back with more friends. Also, yer Captain needs tae get his men tae thae physician.”

Captain White gave her a look that silently asked if she was sure about this. She gave him a nod to tell him she was fine. She didn’t know Blaine but knew that he would not hurt her. There was something about him that spoke of a gentleness uncommon in men. Especially men as large and as skilled with a blade as he obviously was.

Olivia never considered herself to be the type of person who was fascinated by battle or swordplay. But watching Blaine fight the brigands had been breathtaking. He moved with precision and grace. The way he moved was elegant, and she thought it was like watching poetry made flesh. And the fact that he did not kill... Indeed, she thought he looked repulsed by the idea—something else that was uncommon in martial men, as well as alluring. It showed her that he had peace and mercy in his heart. It spoke to her about his character.

“We should be away,” Blaine said. “Your girl will—”

“Apologies. I mean no disrespect, but her name is Aisling,” Olivia interrupted.

A small grin curled the corner of his mouth. “The apologies are mind tae make then. Aisling will ride with Wallace, and I’ll take ye back meself.”

She watched as Blaine mounted his horse before he turned and reached for her. Olivia wasn’t sure how he planned on getting her onto his horse, but when he took her hand, he lifted her off the ground as if she weighed nothing at all. Olivia considered herself petite, but swinging her up onto the saddle behind him took considerable strength that left her wide-eyed. She turned and watched his friend Wallace do the same thing with Aisling. The two women shared a look of absolute amazement, and Olivia smiled when she saw her usually unflappable lady in waiting blush a bright red.

“Ye’ll want tae hang on tightly,” he said.

Olivia didn’t move, not sure what to hold onto. But then he reached back for her hands, pulling them up and around his waist. She gasped when her hand slid across a body that was toned and taut with muscle. A powerful quiver rippled through her heart as her hands pressed into his flesh as she held onto him. And as he moved, she felt his muscles rippling and flexing beneath her fingers.

Laying her cheek against his back, she tried to suppress her feelings and the heat flaring between her thighs. Olivia’s face burned bright with embarrassment, and her throat grew dry. She’d never felt such physical sensations before, and it mortified her, yet she couldn’t deny how nice it felt to be clinging to a man as handsome as Blaine. To be so close to a body that felt like the statue of a Greek god brought to life.

Olivia was embarrassed by her thoughts and physical reactions. She was self-conscious of the lust that coursed through her like a raging river. It was highly improper and inappropriate, bordering on the lewd. Riding like this would never be acceptable back home. But, a

slow grin curled the corners of her mouth upward as she realized she was no longer at home and England's rules didn't apply anymore. So instead, she gave herself over to the feelings as she gripped his tunic and enjoyed the ride.

They rode for near fifteen minutes, and Olivia felt like every bone in her body had been jarred and jostled as they galloped along the road. But she was able to push aside the physical discomfort when she caught sight of the keep that would be her new home.

"Is that Glaslaw Castle?" she asked.

"Aye," Blaine replied. "'tis where ye'll be layin' yer head at night."

"It's... beautiful."

Blaine turned his head and looked back at her, and she felt her breath catch in her throat. His smile was beautiful and made him look softer. Kinder. It made him look more like a child than the man he was.

"It has its charms," he said, then turned back.

To Olivia's thinking, charms was a mild way to describe the keep. A finger of land jutted outward into the ocean. The base of the land was dark stone, rocky and craggy. The top of the finger of land that surrounded the castle was lush and green. A low wall enclosed the ground behind the keep, but she could still see the emerald-colored grass.

The keep itself was all made of dark stone. It made Olivia wonder if it had been built from the same sort of stone that made up the cliff it sat upon. A curtain wall surrounded the keep, though it was lower than the one at home. She supposed with only one way to enter the keep, it was more easily defensible.

The keep itself was tall, three or perhaps four stories tall. She saw far more windows and arrow slits than dotted her family's keep. For

that, she was glad. The thick, salty scent of the ocean was intoxicating—something she'd never enjoyed before—and she looked forward to waking up with the smell of the sea. She could see the base of the cliff and marveled at the waves crashing against the rocks below. If not for the reason she'd been sent to Glaslaw Castle in the first place, Olivia thought she could be thrilled in a place so beautiful.

As they rode down the well-trodden path toward the keep, Olivia saw a town a short way to the east. It hugged the cliff and stretched inland a little way. It seemed about the same size as the town that surrounded her family's keep, and she could see the busy streets. The heavy oak gates in the curtain wall stood open, and they passed through them with the guards standing their post, barely giving them a glance.

Blaine reined his mount to a stop and slid out of the saddle. A stableboy appeared instantly and took the reins as Blaine turned back and helped her down from the back of his mount. Olivia settled her hood about her again and cleared her throat.

"Thank you," she said.

"Ye're welcome."

Wallace helped Aisling down, and she quickly scurried over to Olivia, giving her friend a sultry lovestruck look. Wallace was watching Aisling, and when he saw Olivia's eyes on him, he quickly looked away. Blaine and Wallace took their sheathed swords and other items off their saddles then let the stableboys lead their horses away. They settled their blades on their backs and their bags upon their belts. And when they were finished, Blaine looked at Olivia.

"So why dae ye come tae Glaslaw Castle anyway?" he asked.

"You do not know already?"

He chuckled. "If I kent, would I have asked?"

She looked down, an abashed smile on her face. "I suppose not," she replied. "It was a silly question."

"Daenae worry, lass," Wallace piped up. "If ye're around here for any length of time, ye'll find that Blaine says stupid things all thae bleedin' time."

"Wallace, I ken ye're a savage heathen who doesnae understand proper manners, but ye should watch yer language around a Lady."

"It's all right," Olivia said softly. "I've heard far worse."

Blaine's lips twitched into a small smile. "Manners matter," he said. "But ye never answered me question. Why are ye here?"

"I—I am to live here," Olivia replied, the familiar feeling of dread filling her belly. "Your mother was good friends with mine before she died. So, your parents agreed to take me on as a ward now that my parents are... dead."

A look of compassion crossed his face that was so pure it made her heart swell. "I'm sorry for yer loss."

"Thank you," she replied. "My uncle thought it would be better for me to be—well—somewhere else. Somewhere new."

Blaine nodded as if he understood. "Well, I suppose we should get yet tae me parents."

"I suppose so," she replied, the sense of dread becoming almost overwhelming.

He and Wallace fell into step beside each other and led the way. Still holding her hand, Aisling pulled her friend along. Olivia was fighting the dark feelings that rose within her like an evil tide that threatened to swamp her. They passed beneath the portcullis that hung above the main doors and into the keep. The sunlight glinted off the spiked tips—a reminder that although beautiful, the castle

was a fortress—a fortress filled with martial men who would go to war if their Laird asked.

Blaine led them through a warren of passages until they found themselves in a long stone corridor that ended in a pair of heavy oak doors. Two men stood outside the doors, both wearing dark boiled leather cuirasses and trousers. Both had swords on their hips and had tall, fearsome-looking pikes in their hands.

“Yer faither is with a petitioner,” one of the guards said.

Blaine shrugged. “Is me maither inside?”

“Aye. She is.”

“Good.”

Blaine offered Olivia his arm, and when she took it, she felt an explosion of sensation. She thought he’d felt it too because his body stiffened, and he looked at her with surprise. He turned and offered her that smile again that highlighted everything she thought beautiful about him, sending a current of emotion rushing through her. He gave her a wink as they barged through the door. His legs were longer, his stride bigger, and Olivia had to hurry to keep up. The heavy oak doors crashed into the walls behind them, sending a boom that echoed through the great hall. From beneath the shadows of her hood, Olivia looked around the circular chamber. Her eyes were drawn to the large, colored glass window located in the rear wall. It was filled with a myriad of different colors, and in the sunlight, it cast the chamber in a rainbow of light that was absolutely beautiful.

On a dais below the window sat an oversized, ornately carved chair. Upon it sat a large, stout man with a head of thinning iron-gray hair, a dark beard shot through with gray and predatory dark eyes. Beside him was a smaller, less ornate chair, but the woman sat upon it looked at Olivia with a sense of self-possession that screamed of nobility. She was slim and of medium height with long, dark hair shot through with gray and tied into a tail that hung over her

shoulder. She had green eyes the same shade as Blaine, and they sparkled just the same. She had not yet spoken a word, but Olivia thought she had a kindly, compassionate air.

“Ye may go now,” the man on the throne commanded. “We will discuss this again later.”

The man kneeling on the carpet before the dais got to his feet and cast a look at Olivia’s group as he made his way out. The guards shut the doors behind him, the hollow boom of the doors slamming shut echoing around the circular chamber. With Aisling walking just behind her, they made their way to the foot of the dais and stopped. Blaine let go of her arm and took a step back before bowing deeply to his parents before gesturing to her with his arm.

“Maither. Faither,” Blaine said, his voice authoritative. “I’d like tae introduce ye tae yer new ward. This is thae Lady Olivia.”

Though his tone was not unkind, it sounded clear to Olivia that he was curious about why he was not informed of her coming. Blaine’s mother looked at her with wide eyes, lips parted, and a stricken expression on her face. But when Blaine cleared his throat, she seemed to come back to herself, and a sheepish smile touched her lips. His mother rose from her chair and made her way down the steps in a regal fashion.

With her eyes still fixed on Olivia, the Lady offered the girl a gentle smile then reached out, hesitantly taking her hands. Everything in the woman’s bearing told Olivia she was nervous, but she had no idea about what. She was the Lady of the castle, while Olivia was nothing, after all. So what did the Lady have to be nervous about?

“I am glad to have ye here, me dear,” she said with a slight quiver in her voice. “I loved yer ma like she was me own blood. I mourn her still.”

Olivia gave her a small, formal curtsy. “I am grateful for your hospitality, my Lady,” she said. “This is my lady in waiting, Aisling.”

“Please. Call me Caitriona. As far as I’m concerned, ye’re family tae me. I’m glad tae finally meet ye, Olivia. And it is very nice to meet you as well, Aisling.”

“Thank ye, m’Lady,” Aisling said, also curtsying.

“Step forward, lass,” a deep, rugged voice boomed.

A dark expression crossed Caitriona’s face, but ever the dutiful wife, she stepped back and folded her hands at her waist. She looked up at Olivia and gave her an encouraging nod. Olivia cut a glance at Blaine, but he wasn’t looking at her. He was too busy glowering at his father. She let out a long breath then stepped forward, standing below the Laird on the carpet at the bottom of the stairs.

“Th—thank you for your generous hospitality, m’Laird,” she said.

“Take off yer hood, lass, let us get a look at ye, eh?”

Olivia hesitated, her heart racing and her hands suddenly starting to tremble. She cut a glance at Aisling, a current of fear rippling through her. Olivia knew she would have to take her hood off at some point and knew she couldn’t hide forever. But she was afraid to reveal herself—especially in front of Blaine. She feared what his reaction would be to her deformity.

“I said take off yer hood,” the Laird demanded.

Olivia looked down at the ground, her face burning with the familiar heat of shame. She fought back the tears that welled in her eyes, her fear overwhelming her. Aisling put a gentle hand on her shoulder, and she tried to draw strength from it.

“Girl, we’re extending ye thae courtesy of our hospitality and protection,” the Laird said, his voice tight with anger. “Ye can at least show me thae respect of doin’ as I ask. Now take off yer bleedin’ hood.”

“Faither, there’s nay need tae be so coarse,” Blaine snapped.

“I wasnae talkin’ tae ye, boy,” the Laird fired back.

“If ye’re askin’ for respect, mebbe ye should give a little, eh?”

“Blaine, hold yer tongue,” Caitriona admonished him.

“I’m waitin’, lass. Take off yer bleedin’ hood. Now,” the Laird snapped. “If ye cannae show me that basic amount of respect, ye can go right back tae Aingland for all I care.”

Olivia’s heart lurched, and she bit her bottom lip hard to keep her tears from falling. She reached up with a trembling hand and pulled back the hood. Keeping her gaze fixed to the ground, she couldn’t stop a tear from racing down her cheek when she heard the Laird make a sound of disgust. And when the Laird began to laugh—a gruff and derisive sound—the tears flowed free and unfettered.

“Good God above that mark is surely somethin’,” the Laird said. “I can see why yer uncle was so keen tae ship ye out of Aingland and hide ye up here in thae Highlands.”

“Henry!” Caitriona practically shouted.

“Faither, that’s enough.”

“Hold yer tongue, boy,” his father replied. “I’m thae Laird and will nae be lectured by me whelp.”

“There’s nay need tae be cruel, Faither. Ye can show our guest a civil tongue,” Blaine said, his voice low and menacing.

Rather than explode in outrage at the way Blaine and his wife had spoken to him, the Laird laughed as if it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. Olivia’s heart felt like it was being squeezed, and she found it difficult to breathe. She finally snapped out of her stupor and pulled her hood back up, wishing she could disappear into it

entirely.

“I—I’m sorry. I made a mistake coming here,” she said softly.

“Nay, ye dinnae, child,” Caitriona said.

The Laird wiped the tears of mirth from his eyes as Olivia tried to keep herself from dropping to her knees and turning into a quivering puddle. Aisling stepped up and took her hand, giving it a firm squeeze. The next thing she knew, Blaine had his hand on the small of her back and was quickly ushering her toward a door in the side of the chamber she hadn’t noticed before.

“Come back here,” the Laird called. “I was not done speaking with our new ward.”

“Ye’ve said enough,” Blaine called back, his voice tight and cold.

“Henry, please,” she heard Caitriona say.

Olivia allowed herself to be guided through the door and into a narrow corridor. Aisling was moving quickly behind them, trying to keep up. They traversed a winding path of hallways, and Olivia knew she’d never be able to find her way back. She looked over at Blaine, but he wasn’t looking at her. Instead, his gaze was fixed straight ahead, his face stony. Olivia glanced over her shoulder at Aisling, who favored her with an encouraging smile.

But it didn’t hearten Olivia at all. On the contrary, she felt lower than ever and all she wanted at that moment was to go back to England. To go home. Although he had ushered her out of the great hall protectively, the fact that he couldn’t look at her told Olivia he was just as disgusted by her as his father had been. The only difference being that Blaine at least had the manners not to laugh at her or show his revulsion openly.

Of course, he was disgusted by her. How could he not be? She had let herself believe, if only for a moment, that he wouldn’t be as

repulsed by her like everybody else. He had seemed so kind and such a proper gentleman that she believed he might be different enough that he would see past her mark. That for him, it might not be her defining feature and that he might see her for who she was—not what she looked like.

Olivia silently kicked herself for being so naïve. For being so foolish. She was monstrous. Like that brigand had said—she was a beast.

Blaine stopped before a door and pushed it open, and gestured for them to go inside. Olivia stepped in and was impressed with the accommodation. The room was spacious and had three large windows in the wall across from her. A large hearth was set into the wall with a pair of rocking chairs around it. On the wall directly beside the door was a table with two chairs, and across the room was a beautiful and ornately carved wooden privacy screen. She could see the lip of a large wash basin behind it from where she stood.

On the other side of the room from the wash basin were three steps that led to a platform that held two beds. They looked plush and comfortable. Although the room was nice and very tastefully appointed, it lacked anything distinctly feminine. And she might have been able to enjoy it a bit more if she didn't feel as horrible about herself as she did at that moment.

"I'll send thae chambermaids up tae freshen the room," he said, still unable to look her in the eyes. "And if there's anything ye need, daenae be afraid tae ask. I'll make sure thae household staff know tae treat ye well."

"Thank you, Blaine," she said softly.

He nodded. "I'm sure ye're tired and hungry from yer journey. I'll be sure tae have food and hot water for a bath sent up as well."

"I appreciate your kindness," she said, a hint of sadness and resignation in her voice.

Aisling nodded and lowered her gaze to the floor. Blaine finally looked at her but quickly looked away again, as if he couldn't bear to look upon her for long now that he had seen her for the beast she was. But he nodded and left her room, closing the door quietly behind him. And as he did, Olivia felt her heart shatter into a million pieces knowing he thought of her as a monster. Just like everybody else. Her legs gave out from under her, and she fell to her knees, finally giving into her emotions.

Olivia buried her face in her hands and sobbed wildly. Aisling was there beside her, also on her knees, her arms wrapped around her. She squeezed Olivia tight and stroked her hair.

"That man is a beast. Thae Laird, I mean. A cold, cruel bastard," Aisling said.

"Aye," was all she could manage between choked sobs.

Olivia remained where she was and sobbed. She hadn't been there but ten minutes, and she already hated it. Hated everything about it and wanted nothing more than to go home. Somehow, hearing the whispers about her deformity seemed easier to take from people she'd known most of her life than it was from strangers.

She hated the Laird. She hated Scotland. But more than anything, Olivia hated herself.

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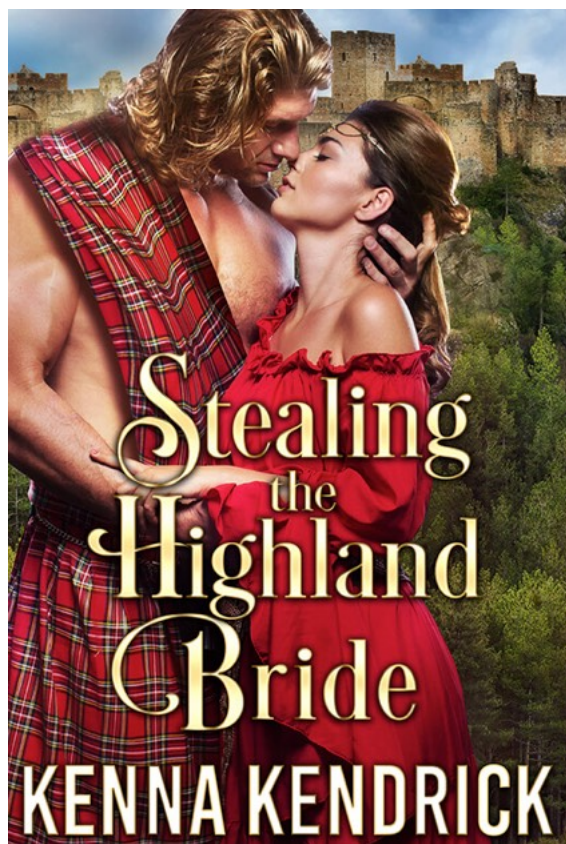
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About the Author

Kenna Kendrick is an American based author of Historical Scottish Romance living in Austin Texas with her husband and three children. Her more than 25-year-old experience as an English Teacher has brought her close to the literary world, growing her love for fictional stories.

Her love for literature was also strong because of her father John who used to write crime-stories. While she tried following on her father's footsteps, a trip to Scotland sealed the deal for as she fell in love with the Celtic myths and the bleak Highlands.



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